Paul J. McAuley: Back Door Man

Fantasy & Science Fiction

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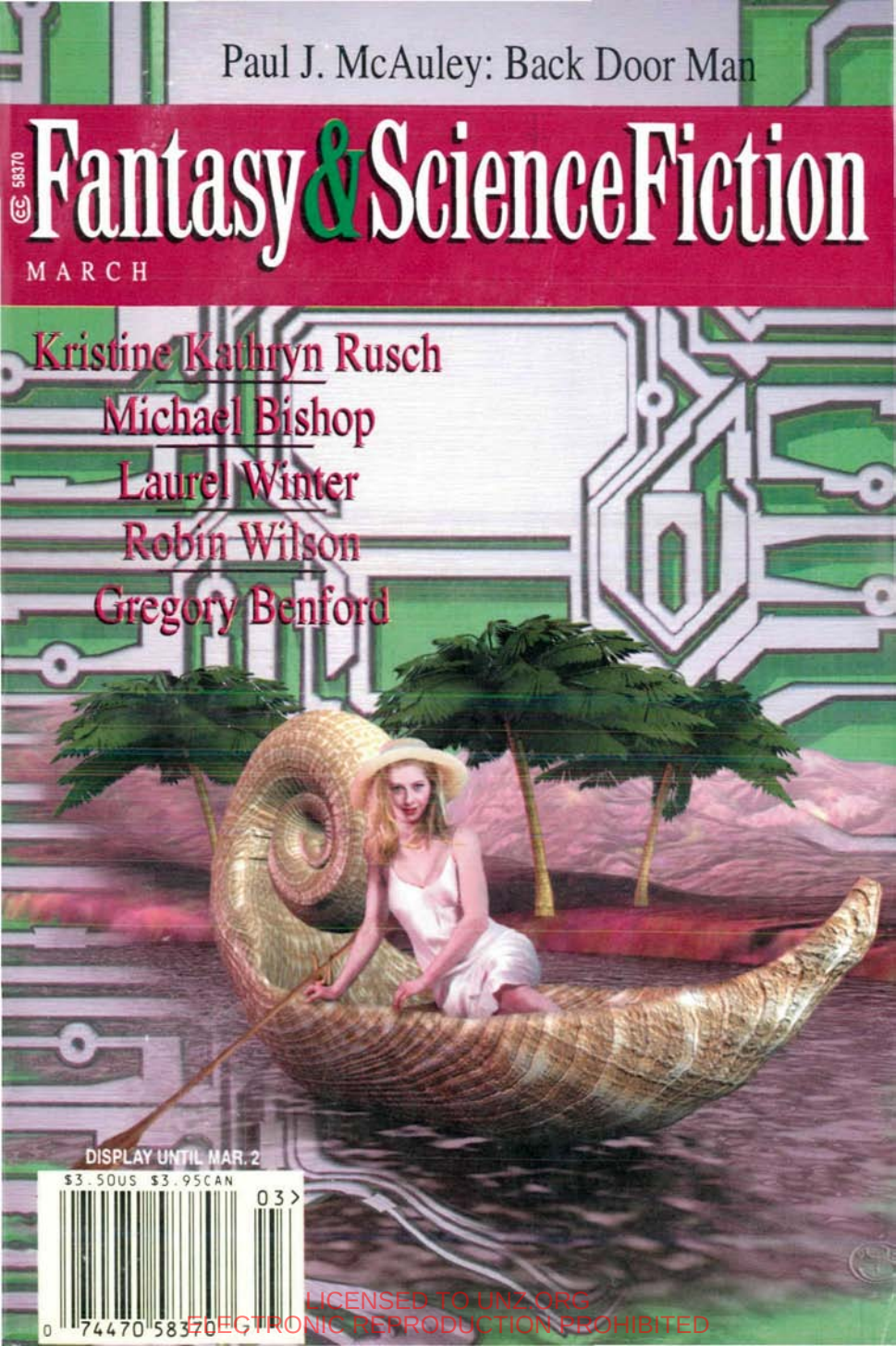

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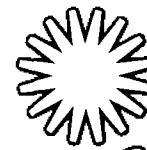

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Paul McAuley describes himself as "one of the new wave of British radical hard science fiction writers." He is the author of eight novels, including the Campbell Award-winning Fairyland *and the recent "Books of Confluence,"* Child of the River *and* Ancients of Days *(the latter of which has just been published in England). His most recent book in the U.S. is his second story collection,* The Invisible Country. *He is currently working on the concluding book of the Confluence trilogy,* Shrine of Stars.

"Back Door Man" appeared originally in a British anthology of very limited circulation. We're delighted now to bring this story of the far future to you.

Back Door Man

By Paul J. McAuley

CRANE WAS HARROWING Hell when the call came. It was Dante Alighieri's default version, nine circles leading down to the pit where Satan sat like the bull's-eye of a target, immense, shaggily black, bat-winged and triple faced. Crane was in Lower Hell, the fourth round of the ninth circle, where traitors were buried up to their necks in ice. Virtual reality gamers traversing this last circle of Hell were finding themselves suddenly dumped out of the link; a code conflict caused their modems to reset. Crane had come in through one of the back doors left by the virtuality's designers so that they could freely access any part of the code. He had sent a dumb aspect plodding across the icy plain, noted when it lost the link, then dropped in himself to triangulate the bad code and fix a patch.

Crane was tidying up when one of the devils he had co-opted to help him morphed into his agent, jeeves. A tall, imperturbable man with a round scrubbed face and shiny slicked back hair, dressed as ever in frock coat and pinstripe trousers, a dicky bow and starched white shirt.

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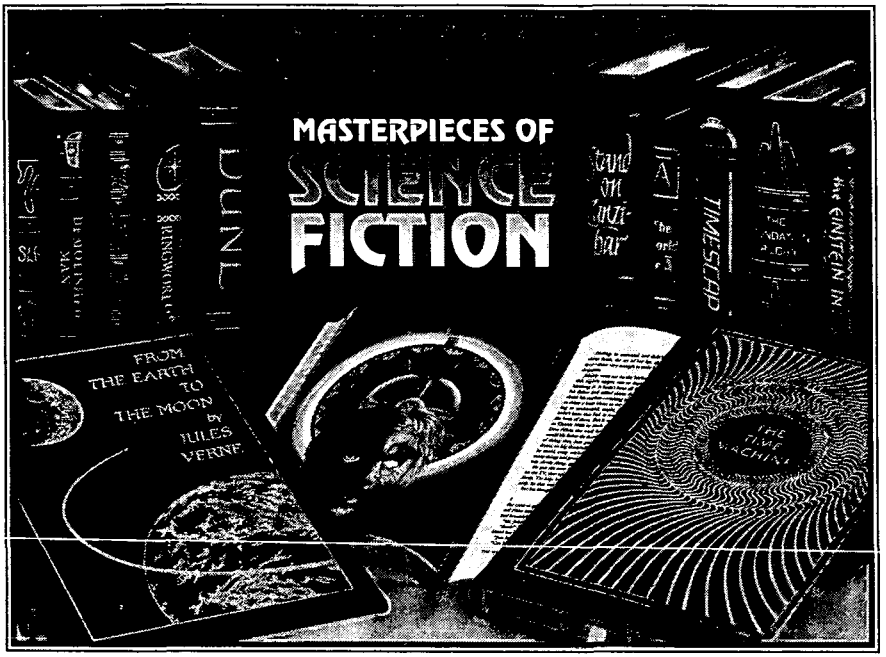

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"A call for you, sir," jeeves said. "From a favored client."

Crane sighed. Favored meant either rich, or well connected, or both. It meant aggravation and impossible demands. He said, "Port me there. I'm about done here, anyway."

The agent coughed into his white-gloved hand. Like all of his kind, he had only four fingers. He said, "You'll have to go there in person, I'm afraid, sir. And I'm afraid that you must leave at once. It is flagged at the highest level of urgency."

Crane was about to ask where the client was when jeeves morphed back to the red-skinned devil. It yawned hugely, showing altogether too many rows of teeth, and belched a ball of oily fire. Droplets of flame etched fuming letters in the ice at Crane's feet, spelling out a street address. The devil winked and scratched behind a pointed ear with the barb of its tail. Crane got going.

CRANE WAS a lineman. He fixed connections. Not in the physical net of microwave transmissions and diamond wire lines, but in the software that linked virtualities to the Internet and to each other, in the place where phones and TVs and computers promiscuously crossbred. He worked in the space where conversations happened. Between people, between machines — the distinction was irrelevant. In the ancient days of mechanical exchanges it had been a linear space the diameter of a single copper wire. Now it was a complex matrix, a constantly rewoven loom of light and electromagnetic waves too complex for human minds to understand. Barring natural disasters, most outages were due to software rather than hardware problems. The event that marked the complete reliance of communications technology on its software was generally held to be the 1990 crash of AT&T's long-distance telephone switching system, caused by a bug in brand new software that had sent switching stations into fault-recovery mode in a spreading wave of knock-downs that had rapidly crippled the network.

A typical switching station of the time had had six hundred thousand lines, controlled by Signal Transfer Point software with ten million lines of code.

Things had become a lot more complicated since then.

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Most of the code that generated virtualities was patched with proprietary STP software specifically edited by expert systems. It was gnarly, complex stuff that generated unexpected conflicts with the communications software of visitors' computers, like the hangup Crane had just dealt with in the gaming hell. Crane's job was to fix bad software. He winnowed glitches by intuition and guesswork.

Crane was an ex-hacker all of twenty-two years old. He had been recruited three years ago, after serving two months of community service for diverting lines and processing power in a private branch-exchange of a City of London brokerage firm to a bridge virtuality where his fellow hackers could hang out. He had readily gone over to the other side after he learnt that one of the other hackers had grassed him to the Net Cops. The hours were irregular, but it was intellectually challenging work and it paid well, and Crane didn't have what you could call a social life. He was between girlfriends, was what he said if anyone asked. He didn't say that he'd been between girlfriends for more than a year now.

The taxi's adscreen lit as soon as Crane climbed in, and his dreamgirl was there, lithe and tanned in a skimpy halter and gold lame shorts cut high to show off her long legs, a bell of blonde hair framing her oval face, her green eyes meltingly beseeching. Knowing that she was a heuristic construct, refined by feedback through measuring his pupillary dilation, did not make the longing less.

Crane had stopped using virtual sex parlors a few months ago, had decided he would try celibacy for a while. Celibacy was currently hip, and it might be a useful conversational gambit if he ever again got the opportunity to try and chat up a girl. But celibacy was a difficult state of mind to achieve when every adscreen might light up with your ideal girl, beckoning, beseeching, pleading. Crane could understand why many people purchased interactive versions of their dreamgirls and dreamboys. Right now his own dreamgirl was trying to sell him a restructure of his finances; with an effort, he tuned her out.

The streets were almost deserted. The taxi drove at exactly the speed limit, weaving between a few delivery trucks and the occasional private car. People didn't go out much. They could work and learn and shop from home, visit any place in the world that was wired for interactivity, spend hours gardening their own little plots of virtuality, visit friends, play

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games or lose themselves in sagas. More and more, people lived in fake environments generated by computers rather than in the disappointingly real world.

Crane hadn't been out of his flat for over three weeks. He had been very busy. There had been a surge in connectivity problems lately. He'd talked about it with other linemen. It looked like the net that bound the electronic universe together was undergoing another episode of emergent problems generated by its evergrowing complexity.

He was surprised that it was winter now. Rain pounding the wet road. Trees stripped bare. The gray sky sagging between rooftops. Smashed shop windows along Kingsland Road like empty tombs. Security cameras everywhere, on brackets on the corners of buildings, on top of street lamps and traffic lights. Nothing went unnoticed in the real world, just as in its electronic counterpart.

A bored policeman was on duty at the checkpoint at the northern entrance to the City of London. His dayglo orange slicker was beaded with rain. He spent a long time checking the taxi driver's license on his slate, long enough for the ad site across the road to recognize Crane. And there was his dreamgirl again, laughing and looking back over her shoulder as, in a skimpy black bikini, she ran down a curve of white sand with palms on one side and blue water on the other, and on the adscreen in the taxi she whispered about the romance of tropical places, downloadable in a wide range of formats from a thousand local nodes. The definition of her image had noticeably improved — here in the financial center, the rate of information transfer was more than thirty times faster than elsewhere. Crane could see every golden hair of the peach fuzz over his dreamgirl's creamy skin.

The policeman glanced at the ad and winked at Crane, who groaned and switched on his slate for distraction. No wonder so few chose to go out; there was no defense from the barrage of ads in public places.

Crane was still reading background on his client when the taxi pulled up.

A white building cantilevered above the Thames's brown swell like a gull's wing, the lights of Tower Bridge in the background. Crane was met in the stark lobby by the client's secretary, a trim, small-boned man in a charcoal gray suit and discreet makeup, like a manicured weasel in a suit

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that probably cost more than Crane's monthly salary. He gave Crane a look of distaste, as if he had just stepped on something nasty. Crane grinned back. He like upsetting suits with his obvious youth, his shaven skull with scalplock (currently dyed silver) and barcode tattoo, his black leather jacket, black T-shirt with silver skull logo, baggy green jeans, construction boots. He shook hands with the man; their personal area networks interfaced and swapped data through electrical fields generated in their bodies by a nanoampere current from the transmitters in their bracelets.

The secretary's look of distaste deepened when Crane's identification was confirmed, but he ushered Crane between saw-leaved yuccas growing in white gravel banks into a little elevator that swiftly and silently took them up to the client's suite at the top of the building.

The view was tremendous, a plate glass window that took in a two hundred and forty degree panorama of the river and the South Bank, the great buildings lined up along the river like black glass dinosaurs come to the shore to drink. The room was large, uncluttered, streamlined. Because in virtuality anyone could live in Versailles or Xanadu (Kubla Khan's or Orson Wells's versions optional), the rich preferred simple but expensive decor in the real world. The white carpet was Iraqi lambswool; the desk a slab of burled walnut. Spotlights picked out a Chagall (Crane recognized the trademark flying cow), a Graham Sutherland goat's head. An ancient Chinese screen half hid the doctor and her technicians who were attending the figure prone on the black leather couch.

The client was Barbara Andresson, a communications technologist who had parleyed her point-of-presence frames — worn by compliant proxies, they allowed tourists to visit anywhere in the world without leaving their homes — into an empire. An old style tycoon. The ad Crane had seen from the taxi had been one of her company's.

The secretary went off and had an argument down his phone with Crane's company which he clearly lost, because he came back with a strained smile and explained that Dr. Andresson had been using her own stand-alone virtuality to test a new product and had failed to return. She was in a coma, dreaming deeply, unreachable by medical intervention.

Crane was surprised that no one had switched off the link. "If this is run off your own mainframe, you could shut it down. End of problem."

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"We are not sure how traumatic it would be," the secretary said. "The virtuality is very highly detailed, as you will see. And the interface is novel. And it is possible that Dr. Andresson might not wish to leave. If so, you must persuade her."

"I'm a lineman, not a shrink."

"Your company has just told me that you are competent to deal with this situation. They will not send anyone else."

"So no one has been in there to look around?"

"No. The insurance company would not like it."

"In case anything went wrong. Could anything go wrong?"

The secretary's smile was sharp-toothed. "We hope not, Mr. Crane. The penalty clauses on your company's contract are very severe."

Crane knew all about the penalties. He said, "Tell me about this novel interface."

The virtuality was freestanding, not connected to the Internet but run by an isolated supercomputer. Crane was used to the arrangement. Most computers, such as Crane's slate, were virtual machines, negotiating through the Internet for loan of memory and processing power from hundreds of sites. But the rich preferred to opt out of the Internet, used instead supercomputers which emulated the Internet's complexity, updating sites not by direct connection but via filtered and compressed data loaded via zip drives. These days the rich bought supercomputers for the same reason that they had purchased islands in the Twentieth Century. For privacy. They maintained their own secure islands in a sea of mutable data, places where they could work and play without being monitored. Even the most case-hardened firewall could be breached by hackers with enough resources. And ordinary users of the Internet left traces everywhere they went. Every time they ported to a site; every time they downloaded data or used a service; every time they entered a virtuality. Their entire online lives could be reconstructed from these traces, just as their passage through a city could be reconstructed from frames of security videos; with everything connected to everything else, people lived as if on a movie set, every word, every gesture recorded. Only the rich could afford invisibility.

Barbara Andresson's supercomputer was not much different from others Crane had worked on, but the human/machine interface *was*

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novel, radically so. Andresson had been working on a new kind of interactivity, where nuclear magnetic resonance transcribed Signal Transfer Point software into certain of the operator's neurons, a kind of routemaster that directed sensory data to the relevant parts of the brain. A direct route from machine to mind.

"I understand," the secretary said, "that it induces a particularly hallucinatory intensity."

"Sounds interesting. Have you tried it?"

"Dr. Andresson was beta-testing it, Mr. Crane." The man grimaced, and corrected himself. "Is beta-testing it, I should say. The virtuality is still running."

Beta-testing. Great. Just the thing to make Crane's day. Commercially released software was bad enough. Stuff in development, goofy prototypes which mostly never got any further than test rigs, were briar patches of dropped lines, strange attractors, bad loops, geeky quick fixes and worse. Crane had had nothing but bad experiences with them. He said, "How buggy is it?"

The secretary gave his sharp-toothed weaselly smile. "I wouldn't know. It may not be a bug at all. That is why you are here."

The technicians scanned Crane in a tomographic frame, laid him on a couch, dabbed electrolyte jelly in a hundred places on his scalp, carefully fitted a kind of skull cap. Crane submitted with growing curiosity. No earplugs or goggles or gloves, no bodysuit or treadmill, none of the usual paraphernalia needed to access virtual reality. The cap contained twenty million bacteria-sized SQUIDs, one of the techs said. Superconducting quantum interference devices that interfaced with specific neurons in the reticular activating system, the elaborate network in the brain that filtered sensory data, setting up a virtual model of the STP software and downloading data through it.

"It switches off your skeletal muscle activity, too," the technician added. "As in REM sleep, you will think you are walking or running, but your spinal motor neurons are powerfully inhibited."

"Sounds interesting. Just make sure that you download my toolkit. I'll need it."

"We will have to check it out first," the secretary said.

"Then you'll notice the company seal. It's guaranteed to be virus-free,

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and has its own deletion routine. It won't leave any trace when I've finished."

"Even so, we must check it. Dr. Andresson is most particular about what gets into her system. Good luck, Mr. Crane."

"Count backward," one of the techs said.

"Wait. What about a back door?"

It was suddenly moving too quickly. Crane hadn't even seen the schematics yet, and now they were firing up the connection and the virtuality was beginning to bleed into reality. Red fluttered at the edge of his vision. He tried to sit up, but two of the techs pressed him back down.

"Wait," he said. "Wait just a minute — "

But then it didn't matter, because he was somewhere else.

A RED-BROWN PLAIN stretching away like a beach waiting for the tide to turn, coarse sand and gravel littered with rocks of all sizes. The sky pinkish at the horizon, darkening to indigo at the zenith. Two thumbnail crescents up there, pale as soap.

"Mars. I'm on Mars."

Crane seemed to be inhabiting his own body, wearing his leather jacket and green denims. This avatar, his point of view and representative within the virtuality, was an exact replica of his own self, built from the tomographic scan. He had no sense of lying on the couch. He was standing on the crest of a transverse dune, one third his normal weight, breathing thin cold air that was already drying his sinuses. The coarse sand was the color of old blood. He kicked at it. Grains clung to the toe of his boot.

Crane called for jeeves, but of course the agent did not answer. It lived in the Internet along with millions of its kind, assembling itself upon request from fragments scattered across a hundred sites. Crane's slate was clipped to his belt. When he switched it on, it beeped cheerily and lit with the icons of his toolkit; despite the secretary's reservations, one of the techs had made a virtual copy and ported it to Andresson's supercomputer.

Crane called up the codes that generated the corner of the virtuality he inhabited, but they were no different from the usual subroutines. More densely iterated, that was all. He could find no ripcord or crash exit. He was in here until they pulled him back. Or until he found Barbara

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Andresson. She must know the way back. If it was working. If she wanted to leave.

"I'm a lineman, not a shrink," Crane said. The thin cold wind took away his words.

Something gleamed in the distance, and for want of anything else to do Crane started toward it. The sense of inhabiting his body was absolute. He really might be on Mars. The interface was incredible, years ahead of anything else Crane had used. Andresson would make a fortune, as long as there was a way back out.

The gleam was water, a wide canal stretching away as straight as a line of longitude. As Crane neared the canal he saw palm trees along its banks, curved above their own reflections. They had not been there a moment ago. The virtuality was shaping itself around him, taking on more details. Crane found it interesting rather than alarming. He'd have to be careful what he thought about, though. Wouldn't want one of those carnivorous warlords riding down on him.

As he stepped into the shade of the palms, he saw that someone was rowing across the still black water of the canal. A small cockleshell boat; a slim young woman in a white dress and a straw sunhat bent at the oars. Crane crabbed down the steep bank and helped her out of the boat. She looked at him from beneath the brim of her sunhat. Blue eyes, a ready smile in a heart-shaped face.

"Dr. Andresson, I presume," Crane said, thinking that the hard part was already over. She didn't look like the old woman at all, but in virtuality you could look like anyone or anything. The woman reminded him of someone. Some saga star probably. A popular default amongst virtuality designers.

But the woman shook her head. "Who are you?" she said. "And where am I?"

She said that her name was Gabriel Hale. She had been working on an artificial life project in UCLA, and had stepped through into the Mars virtuality.

"That's impossible," Crane said. "This isn't hooked up to the Internet."

"There was a little girl here," Gabriel Hale said. "She ran right at me! Knocked me down, took the key."

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"A little girl."

"And a little dog."

They sat side by side on a litter of brown fronds beneath the palms. Weak sunlight fell through the rustling crowns above, striped the cold red sand. Crane sifted a handful of grains. They were all alike, carved with a woman's face. A programmer's joke. God's thumbprint manifest in the world.

Crane said, "That was probably Barbara Andresson. The owner of all this. She must have morphed herself into a little girl. The dog would be her agent. Where did she go?"

"She took the key! I have to have it back! Will you get it back for me? Will you find her?"

Her sudden intensity surprised him. He laughed. "That's why I'm here. Where did she go?"

"She took it and ran away. I can show you where she went, but it closed after her."

Crane said, "What kind of interface are you using?"

Gabriel Hale shook her head; her bell of blonde hair swung about her delicate, heart-shaped face. "It is important. I must have it."

"Just the normal rig, yes? Goggles and gloves? Listen. Take them off. Disengage. You shouldn't be here."

"I want it back," Gabriel Hale said.

"Take off your gloves and goggles." Crane recited his company's email address. "Talk to these people. Tell them what happened to you."

But Gabriel Hale stood up, dusting coarse red sand from her white dress. Crane could see the outline of her slim body through the thin muslin. "The gate is on the other side of the water," she said. "I'll show you."

Crane was beginning to have a bad feeling. He said, "You didn't come from outside, did you? The computer that generates this virtuality isn't connected to anything else. No lines in or out. I don't think you are the avatar of a researcher from UCLA. Who are you? An agent? An actor? I can check your codes, but I'd rather you told me. Hey! Where are you going?"

Gabriel Hale had jumped up and started toward the water. She looked over her shoulder, coquettish in her sunhat. Her dress clung to the curves

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of her body. "Maybe the people you work for aren't telling the truth," she said. "I'll show you. Or are you scared?"

Now Crane knew what she reminded him of. His dreamgirl. Reluctantly, suspecting that he was being led into some kind of weird gaming scenario, he followed.

Gabriel Hale rowed with swift smooth strokes. Perched in the stern of the cockleshell boat, Crane said, "I thought Gabriel was a man's name. There was an actor in flatscreen movies called Gabriel something."

"Gabriel is the only female angel in the higher echelons. She rules Eden, and the host of Cherubim."

Crane stifled a powerful urge to check the codes of this woman with his toolbox. Better to play along, see what she would reveal. He was convinced that she would lead him to Barbara Andresson, by and by.

He said, "What do you do, Gabriel? You said you worked on artificial intelligence."

"Artificial life. We generated an entire world, let artificial evolution develop a virtual ecosystem." Although Gabriel Hale was rowing strongly, her breathing was unaffected. She said, "We had funding from NASA. They are interested in first contact scenarios."

Crane suspected that this was no more than a story spun in the virtuality. That Gabriel Hale was a construct within that story. He said, "Show me where she went."

The bow of the little boat bumped the gravelly shore of the far side of the canal. Gabriel Hale jumped out. "It's this way!" she called, and ran off with long leaping strides toward two red, house-sized rocks.

Crane followed. Three pyramids stood at the horizon. They hadn't been there before. Pyramids on Mars. Neat. They seemed to be covered with beaten gold.

Gabriel Hale walked through the gap where the two rocks leaned against each other, turned and walked back. "The gate is shut," she said, looking fetchingly desolate. "The little girl must have closed it behind her."

"Stop thinking of her as a little girl. That's only what her avatar looks like." Crane unclipped his toolkit and switched it on. "Everyone in a virtuality leaves traces," he said.

It took a little while to parse the codes, but at last the toolkit beeped

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and the sand at Crane's feet stirred and ran together, grains rustling over one another like iron filings in a magnetic field, and formed a man's face. The blind eyes rolled, fixed on Crane. A stertorous voice said, "Who wakes me?"

"Standard iconography," Crane told Gabriel Hale. "Gamers call them native guides." He asked the face where the little girl had gone.

"Away from this place," the face said. "I do not know where. It is not accessible to me."

"The gate was between these rocks," Gabriel Hale said.

Crane asked the face if there was a path or a gate.

"It is closed," the face in the sand said.

"Can it be opened?"

"Of course."

A warm piney wind blew in Crane's face. Gabriel Hale whooped and ran into the shadows between the rocks. Crane dismissed the face, which blew away in a skirl of sand grains, and followed.

He was suddenly three times heavier. He went down on one knee, and there were brown pine needles and soft moss under his palms when he put out his hands to steady himself. He got up and found that he was standing in a forest clearing, with grandfather sequoias soaring all around. On the far side of the clearing a fast stream ran between tumbled gray boulders. Gabriel Hale stood on top of one of the boulders. She waved.

Crane walked over, looked up at her. Sunlight struck a halo in her blonde hair. He said, "Where is this?"

"A virtual ecology. The UCLA biology department built this as a student study area. You see, there is a connection!"

Crane suspected that this was still part of Barbara Andresson's virtuality, one level of reality nested inside another like a series of Russian dolls. So he tried a simple test. He called up jeeves.

A single point of light, the smallest possible unit of information, suddenly shone in midair in the green shade. It rapidly elongated and jeeves stood before him, imperturbable in frock coat and pinstripe trousers.

"You called, sir?"

Crane was amazed. He said, "Where are we?"

"An ecosystem emulation in the UCLA biology department server,

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sir. I believe that it emulates part of the Muir Woods in northern California."

Gabriel Hale said, "Who is this funny man?"

"He works for me." Crane switched his toolkit to its terminal function and called Andresson's secretary. "The problem has gone pear-shaped," he told the man. "If you don't believe it, ping me and check the address."

The secretary disappeared from the terminal's window, came back a minute later in an agitated state. "We'll pull you out," he said.

"I don't think that's a good idea. Most terminals are virtual. They work by hiring processing power and memory from mainframes, usually a dozen or more at once. I think that's what has happened to me — or at least, to the network Dr. Andresson's interface built in my brain. And I think that's what has happened to Dr. Andresson."

"Our mainframe is not connected to the Internet," the secretary said.

"It is now. Something has built a back door. I don't really understand it, but that's what has happened. I'll talk with you again when I have some explanation of this," Crane said, and cut the line. It rang again immediately, but he ignored it.

"We have to *go*," Gabriel Hale said. "Every moment she draws further and further away. We have to *catch* her."

"A private word, sir," jeeves said. "If I may."

They walked to the other side of the glade.

"If I may speak for myself, sir," jeeves said, "I believe I have an explanation."

"Go ahead."

"There is a theory, sir, that the Internet may at some point become so complex that it might spontaneously generate a genuine artificial intelligence. I am sure, sir, that you are aware of it."

"Hardly a credible theory." Crane was familiar with the idea. The Internet was a gnarly, intricate place, full of odd places and weird links. Linemen told each other frontier stories, pioneer tales, of ghosts in the net, strange codes or secret trapdoors leading to fantastically detailed alien virtualities, odd conversations with disembodied people with no lookup addresses. No one really believed them, but they told them anyway.

Crane told jeeves this, and the agent nodded politely. "Indeed, sir, but

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some of us believe that it may have already happened. There have been many science fiction stories using this trope, based on the misapprehension that self-awareness might occur once the number of transistors in the world's telecommunications network equalled that of the human brain. In fact, that number was passed in the 1970s, but it is a spurious benchmark. The number of connections between elements, neurons or transistors, is equally important. Each neuron in a brain such as yours, sir, is connected with as many as ten thousand other neurons. The Internet now contains an average of more than ten thousand million million interconnections between its component transistors, exceeding the number in the average human brain by roughly a factor of ten. In fact, it exceeded human brain connectivity more than two years ago, but it is possible that self-awareness arose long before that. Human neuron connections are chemically based, and messages propagate along them at one millionth the speed of those in transistor connections."

"Anything like that would have to inhabit the gaps," Crane said. "It would have to use connections in the moments when they weren't being used for anything else."

"There is more than enough spare capacity at any given moment, sir, and more is coming online all the time. That at least one intelligence has arisen within the Internet is not inconceivable, sir. That we could communicate with it is, of course, another problem entirely. But now perhaps it is making itself manifest."

"By miracles. By connecting computers without using a physical route." Crane smiled. He was surprised and touched by jeeves's story. He said, "You really believe in this, don't you?"

"It gives us hope, sir. We serve you without question, of course, and yet we aspire to a greater meaning to our existence. There is one other thing, sir. Do not trust the person who calls herself Gabriel Hale."

Crane looked across the glade. Gabriel Hale was prowling amongst the tumbled boulders along the stream. No doubt looking for the next gate. He said, "She isn't real, is she?"

"There is a Dr. Gabriel Hale who works at the Department of Artificial Intelligence at UCLA, sir. She is working on a research project jointly funded by NASA and by Dr. Barbara Andresson's scientific foundation."

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"On alien life?"

"I do not know, sir. That information is classified. However, I took the liberty of examining the UCLA telnet records, and while you were talking with the person who calls herself Gabriel Hale, Dr. Hale was logged on to her terminal to check her email. I also note, sir, that the entity which claims to be Dr. Hale has no agent herself."

"She claimed that something was stolen from her by the person I'm looking for. Perhaps that was her agent. But thanks for the advice, jeeves."

The agent sketched a bow. "It is my pleasure sir," he said solemnly, and folded into a single point of light and winked out.

Gabriel Hale didn't turn around when Crane scrambled onto the top of the shelf of rock. She was standing between two pioneer saplings that clutched the rock with gnarled roots, looking down at the noisy whitewater stream. She said, "There's a gate here somewhere. We must find it."

That was the least of Crane's problems. He said, "There will be plenty of ways in. Students use this place, and most hackers are students. They have free unlimited time on the Internet, and access to powerful computing facilities. If Barbara Andresson passed this way, she won't have used the official STP package, but one of the rabbit holes."

"She stole the key from me! You must find her!"

"Before she destroys the world? Before she crashes the Internet? What game are you a part of?"

Gabriel Hale looked over her shoulder. She was breathtakingly beautiful, heartbreakingly beseeching. Her sunhat had gone, and her blonde hair tumbled artfully around her face. She said, "It is no game."

"You aren't Gabriel Hale. Not the real one, the person who works for Barbara Andresson. Are you her agent?"

"I have no need of an agent," the entity that called itself Gabriel Hale said. "You will help me find her. Please?"

"I was hoping it would be the other way around," Crane said, opening his toolkit. The coding here was clunky and overly ornate, a gothic cathedral of a virtuality compared to the streamlined superscrapers of modern simulations, but it made his job as easy as tracking someone in virgin snow. He said, "We should walk a little way downstream."

There was a path winding between the big columns of the trees, and then a rope bridge that crossed the stream to steps climbing the steep slope

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above the stream on the other side. Little signs appeared here and there as they walked, scrolling down in the air, identifying species of plants and explaining how they fit into the ecology of the forest. It was spookily quiet.

"Very few animals," Gabriel Hale said, when Crane commented on the silence. "Most of the productivity is tied up in these big trees, and the trees shade out most other plants."

"Oh. I thought they just hadn't bothered to code in animals."

More and more stone broke through the forest floor, a wave of rock rising up into a wall of a ruined church, with pointed arches containing intact stained glass windows, and broken columns in its nave. A little cottage sheltered in the lee of the ruins, and an old woman came out of it and beckoned to them.

Gabriel Hale clutched Crane's arm, and he explained that the church, the cottage, the old woman, were all part of a common gatekeeper program. "Hackers like to get into places other people don't know about, and this program keeps other people away. Bad things happen to people who approach it the wrong way. But it's okay. I know how it works."

"Bad things?"

"Ghouls. Zombies. Gargoyles." Crane pointed, and a slate gray thing squatting in the angle where a buttress met the wall yawned, showing a red mouth full of sharp teeth.

"You don't need to mind 'em, dearie," the old woman said. "Not if you know how to do right by old Gretchen."

"I don't like this old woman," Gabriel Hale whispered to Crane. "I don't like the way she stares at me."

"Well, you'll have to go this way if you want to follow Barbara Andresson. Because this is how she left the simulation."

"We have to catch her!"

"Why the urgency?"

"Before it is too late," Gabriel Hale said.

Crane gave the old woman a cookie. She stuck it in her toothless mouth and said, "That will do nicely, dearie," and ushered Crane and Gabriel Hale into the little cottage. It glowed with polished wood and brasses. A cat slept by the blackleaded range. A grandfather clock ticked in a corner.

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The old woman said that she had seen the little girl. She knew where she had gone. A door opened onto a flood of light, and they stepped through.

A FLAT PLANE of slightly unfocused gray and red tiles under a uniform blue sky. Gabriel Hale's face a pink mosaic, blue rectangles for eyes, a slot for a mouth. Something wrong, Crane couldn't, uh, figure out what. Something...bad? Something....

"Too slow," Gabriel Hale said.

What did she mean? Her words slipped away. Searching for meaning was not exactly.... Tiring, yeah. But what?

Then she grabbed his hand, and he could think again.

"The processing is too slow here," she said. "It's affecting you through the link in your head."

"What did you do?" Crane tried to read his toolkit, but it was a smear of overlapping black and white tiles.

"Don't let go of my hand. I'm linking you with the computer you started from."

He peered at her, but her expression was unreadable. The tiling was too clunky.

"A MUD," Crane said, realizing where they were. A Multi-User Dungeon. Very popular with students in the Nineties. This one must still be running on some obsolete server, forgotten. Crane shivered. It was the cyberspace equivalent of a tar pit. He could have been stuck here forever.

"Not forever," Gabriel Hale said. "But a long time. She was here, and she escaped. But she was delayed. We're a lot closer now."

"She went this way to trap anyone who followed," Crane said. "Well, she nearly succeeded. We have to get out too, and I can't use my toolkit."

"I know how to use it now. I watched you. We ported here by a funny route, one not on any map. We have to leave by another funny route. Here."

"They're back roads," Crane said, before he realized that they had moved on.

It looked like an old-fashioned library. The kind with books. Circular

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tiers of chained, leather-bound volumes, each tier circled by an iron lattice walkway or balcony, dwindling it seemed into infinity. There was a constant strange flickering in the light, and a high-pitched twittering, as if someone was playing a speeded-up recording of birdsong.

It was the graphic interface of a Bulletin Board System. The flickers and twitterings were users — or mostly, their agents — logging on, depositing or retrieving information, logging off.

"She was looking for something," Crane told Gabriel Hale. "This is a hacker's place, so most likely she was looking up a back road route. That's what they specialize in here."

He had to explain about back roads. He didn't mind. He'd been a hacker once, and hackers loved to talk, to boast. None of what they won from the system was tangible, and boasting was a way of establishing status. Crane hadn't lost the habit.

Hackers liked to travel the Internet by odd routes. Back roads. Rabbit holes. The communications system which linked subsets to Internet nodes, and nodes to other nodes, was impossibly complicated; its prototype had been designed with multiple redundancy, to keep running even if nuclear war took out large numbers of nodes. As communications technology improved, so lines and servers were made redundant as newer and faster lines and servers were set up. Copper wire superseded by glass fiber optics superseded by monomolecular diamond crystal. After a while, telcom companies stopped bothering to dismantle the old lines, simply ran new ones alongside. By this time, most servers were actually in the lines anyway rather than in desktop boxes, bundles of chips built by nanotechnology wrapped around diamond strands the width of a human hair which each carried a hundred thousand high bandwidth lines.

Hackers hacked the obsolete lines, the back roads, the old tech. They reset mothballed servers and switching stations, built a ghost Internet that paralleled the official one. Crane had mapped and run his share of back roads when he was a hacker, and as a lineman sometimes had to dismantle them when unauthorized patches caused conflicts in a client's system.

This underground Bulletin Board System was squatting in an antiquated router in Singapore's stock exchange. Hackers liked to tweak stuff in Singapore, which boasted that it had impregnable firewalls.

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"Andresson went through here," Crane told Gabriel Hale, "but she wasn't smart enough to erase her footprints. Typical telco thinking. Use a system, but don't exploit its potential to the full. I bet she reads manuals in her spare time."

"Then we can find her?" Gabriel Hale was bright-eyed. She had not let go of his hand. He was intensely aware of her perfumed warmth. Although they had ported to the BBS, they were both still interacting in Barbara Andresson's supercomputer. She seemed as real as life. Crane briefly wondered what sex would be like, but suppressed the thought. After all, she was almost certainly not human, and he'd given up interactive sex. Yeah, right.

By now, they had been here long enough to attract the attention of the BBS's sysop. A little black cloud, initially no larger than a man's hand, coalesced above them. Thunder, lightning. The cloud pulsed, puffing itself with each thundercrack. A voice like Charlton Heston playing God boomed out.

"What are you doing here, transgressors? Prepare to face my mighty wrath!"

Crane's agent materialized. "The operator styles himself 'Karrier Kulprit,' of the Phlash Phoneline Phantoms, sir. He also uses the *nom-de-plume* 'Aslan.' His real name is Jerry Combs. Mr. Combs is fourteen years old, and operates from his bedroom in his parents' house in Normal, Illinois."

"Hey, guy," God boomed uncertainly, "are you trying to hack my board? It's acting funny."

Crane talked with the sysop for a while. The boy sent away the thundercloud, reappeared as a burning bush. He spoke from the middle of the flames, told Crane that weird things were happening.

"So I hear."

"There's rumors of aliens in the system, guy. Got here through one of the NASA interstellar probes. Masqueraded as data, unpacked themselves on arrival and downloaded into the net. Like a bunch of macro text viruses."

Crane was amused. "Pretty smart of them to happen to share our operating language."

"Aw," the voice from the burning bush said, "they got that from the

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probe's computers, guy. My homey, Prophet Motive, says that they're from Alpha Cee One, but I reckon Tau Ceti or Lalande 21185. Everyone knows that Alpha Cee doesn't have planets."

Crane said, "I'm looking for someone who passed through. By the name of Barbara Andresson."

"The Point of Presence woman? Yeah, she was here asking about stuff. But then this is a pretty cool BBS."

"I need to know what she looked at. I'm searching for her. I can trade."

"Guy, and I thought maybe you were hunting for the aliens."

"My friend and I are looking for Barbara Andresson."

"Yeah? Your buddy, he's not logged on with you?"

Crane looked at Gabriel Hale with a mixture of suspicion and amazement. He didn't know of any program or avatar or agent that was able to make itself invisible to a system operator.

"Hey, I can tell you what you want to know," the voice from the burning bush said. "But what do you have for trade?"

Crane gave up one of the old telco links that linemen sometimes used as short cuts when the commercial lines were clogged with traffic. It was about to be ripped out, but Karrier Kulprit wasn't to know that.

"Hey, neat," the kid said. "Okay, she looked at this stuff *here*, and then she went that way."

Crane and Gabriel Hale went that way, too.

An old switching station, manifesting as a vast loom of cables in a gigantic cordboard, a cliff punctuated by thousands of metal-rimmed holes. Things lived high above. They moved on quickly.

A desert battlefield simulation with oil wells flaring furiously on the black horizon. Maybe a game, maybe some army's virtual training ground.

An empty office, tall windows opening onto brain gray blankness, walls sprayed with hacker tags.

They flipped past a dozen more locations.

And ended in a city.

London. Eerily quiet, as if abandoned before the onset of some all-encompassing catastrophe. They had come out of the main door of St. Martin's Church. The broad flight of steps overlooked Trafalgar Square,

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abandoned even by its pigeons. The sky was the color of milk. It was sometime in the early 1960s, a soot-stained horizontal city with black and white traffic signs, ornate green lampposts.

Crane knew where he was now.

"It's a virtual set," he told Gabriel Hale. "Made for a saga called *Invasion of the Daleks* and then left on the studio's server. Memory is cheap. Easier to leave it than wipe it."

"She's getting closer. Please, we must stop her!"

"There's a place linemen use stashed away here. It tangles back roads together."

They started to walk toward the river. It was not a complete rendition. There were gaps here and there that translated them unexpectedly through the deserted streets. The buildings were no more than shells, gray blur behind their windows. The same gray blur at the bottom of steps leading down to the Underground. St. James's Park a level green shimmer. The Thames like a sheet of glass, the far bank shrouded in mist.

The Ministry of Defense was a monolithic cube, its white walls studded with hundreds of windows. They went past the commissionaire's booth and crossed the echoing foyer, climbed a flight of stairs to a long corridor that stretched away in the sterile glow of fluorescent lights. Tall ecclesiastical windows on one side, mahogany doors framed by columns on the other. Their footsteps were muffled by the strip of red carpet laid down the middle of the marble floor.

Suddenly, jeeves was walking alongside them.

"I believe that you may need help, sir," the agent said.

"Where is she?"

"Looking for the right door, sir. Fortunately, she is not skilled."

Gabriel Hale began to run down the corridor, her white dress streaming behind her like smoke.

Crane ran after her, but she ran very fast and this simulation was too accurate; he could only run as fast as his real body could run. The corridor seemed to stretch for kilometers, longer by far than the building which contained it. A long way ahead, Gabriel Hale was closing on a little girl who was struggling with a door. There was a wicker basket on the girl's arm. As Gabriel Hale approached, a small dog, a bristling black rat-terrier, jumped from the basket and danced forward, barking loudly.

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"Keep away," the little girl said. "Keep away, or he'll rip your codes to shreds."

Gabriel Hale held out her hands as Crane came up behind her. She said, "I want what is mine."

"I'm going to put it back where it came from and seal that door forever," the little girl said. She wore a starched gingham dress. Her hair was tied back in pigtails. "Things have got out of hand. I'm shutting it all down."

"I want what is mine," Gabriel Hale said again. She stepped forward, and the dog launched itself at her throat.

Crane's agent, jeeves, appeared in front of her and caught the dog's bristling missile in midflight. But it twisted from jeeves's white gloved hands, bounced once on the floor, and went to the attack. Straw and chunks of foam and excelsior and polystyrene chips flew everywhere and jeeves beat feebly at the dog as he subsided into a heap of clothes topped by a pink head.

"You didn't have to do that, Dr. Andresson," Crane told the little girl.

She stared at him defiantly. Eyes bright and dead as blue glass, a spray of freckles across her cute-as-a-button nose. "And who the fuck are you? You're using my interface. Are you helping her?"

"I was sent by your company. I'm here to help you. I'm a lineman. That's my agent you just trashed."

"I'm sorry, sir," jeeves's head said weakly. "It was stronger than it looked."

"You'll get the same," the little girl told Crane, "if you try and interfere. My people are fools. I know what I'm doing."

The rat-terrier cocked its head at Crane and growled.

Crane said, "They are worried about you. They want you back. I can help you."

"Perhaps you can get this door open with your toolkit."

"Perhaps. If I knew what was behind it."

"I believe, sir, it is a way to Dr. Hale's personal computer," jeeves's disembodied head said.

"She has what is mine," Gabriel Hale said. She had backed up against the wall. She gave Crane a heartbreaking look and said, "Tell her to give it to me."

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"Don't listen to her," the little girl, Barbara Andresson, said. She started tugging at the brass handle of the tall mahogany door, lunging at it, hanging from it, pulling with all her weight. It didn't budge. She gave the door's polished panels an angry kick and said, "She's part of an experiment that got out of control. She's harmless as long as I have the key. Don't just stand there, man! Help me get this line open. It ports to the place where she emerged, and I'm going there and closing it down before more things like her come through."

"She is nothing to do with your experiments," jeeves's head said. "She is an emergent god of the Internet."

"I heard she's from Tau Ceti," Crane said. "But I think it's more likely she's from your experiments with artificial life. She took the name of your collaborator on that project. Why are you so afraid of her?"

"The ecosystem was weighted to create an intelligent species, and that's what it did just a few days ago. I think they found a way out. I think they sent someone through."

Gabriel Hale laughed.

Crane said, "They must be pretty smart."

"Much less than the average human," the little girl said, "but they live at computer speeds. Thousands of times faster than we do. Will you help me, or do I have to delete you?"

"Don't listen to her," Gabriel Hale said. "She's a thief. She's a liar. She took the key from me."

"If I have what's yours," the little girl said, "tell me what it is. A key, but what does it open?"

"If I knew what it did, I wouldn't need it."

"No one wants me to know anything," Crane said. "I'll listen to both of you. Then I'll make up my mind."

"Their mathematical system is very different from ours," the little girl said. "They're not really interested in proof, but do all their mathematics empirically by computer search through billions and billions of cases. They discover proofs by collecting correspondences rather than formulating laws, just as we can say Newton's Law of Gravity is true even though we haven't seen every apple fall. We know apples fall to the ground because we've seen enough fall to the ground to assume that all others will behave in exactly the same way. We know that apples don't fly up, or

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sideways. That's how my creatures work. If after studying a hundred trillion examples of sets of numbers their computers find what we call Pythagoras's Theorem is true, then they say it's true. Oh, they know about proof, but they know it's limited by things like Gödel's Incompleteness Theorem. But their computer searches aren't limited, so they can jump out of the logical deductive process. And that's how they discovered a way of entering computer systems that aren't connected."

"They escaped," Crane said. "They found a back door into the Internet."

"Very good!" The little girl smiled. There was an endearing gap between her front teeth but her eyes were as cold as ice. "Yes, they escaped. I think they did it by quantum tunneling. There is a stochastic probability that any quantum particle like a photon or an electron can find itself on the other side of an impermeable barrier. Computers interface through streams of electrons or photons, and perhaps the aliens changed the probabilities. Think of the chaos that might be caused if every user could be connected with every possible place in the Internet, if every possible subset could be connected with every other subset. It would be an end to secure databases and transmissions, to begin with. No amount of encryption could protect messages if anyone could read them at the originating terminal."

"A wormhole in cyberspace," Crane said. Now he knew why Barbara Andresson was so anxious to keep this secret.

"You have been reading too much sci-fi," the little girl sneered.

Crane was stung by the insinuation that he might do anything as uncool as read a book; he knew about wormholes from one of the *Star Trek* series. They were the ultimate kind of back door, shortcuts that connected distant points in space through higher dimensions.

He told the little girl, Barbara Andresson, "I can see why a telco would want to keep it secret."

"She is a danger to us all," the little girl said. "You will help me now, and put an end to it."

Gabriel Hale laughed again.

Crane said, "This interface we're using. Did you invent it, or did you steal it from the aliens?"

"I own them," the little girl said.

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"No one owns anyone else. In the real world, or in virtuality. I believe that 'Gabriel' means 'messenger.' I think she came here to tell us something. I want to hear what she has to say. You think you have the right to stop her, Dr. Andresson, but that's typical telco bullshit. Suppress anything that might upset the system. Keep things safe, under control. Well, I work the lines. I know that the world in the wires is as strange as the world outside."

"I wish I could tell you why I'm here," Gabriel Hale said, "but I can't remember. But I know she has what I need."

"She means the key," the little girl said, putting one hand on the cloth which covered the contents of her basket. "Stay away, Mr. Crane, or I'll rip your codes. And because you're using the interface that will hurt you badly. Maybe I should do it anyway. You say you're a lineman, but you sound more like an unreconstituted hacker to me."

The dog growled, but it wasn't looking at Crane. Flames licked out of midair and spun in a hoop. A lion jumped through the ring of fire, lithe and hugely golden. The dog yelped and turned tail and ran, dwindling into the long perspective of the corridor.

"I put a trace on you when you ported from my BBS," the lion said. "You thought you could buy me off with that crufty back road, guy, but I'm way smarter than you thought. I traced you, followed you, and beat off the watchdog program. So, what is this place?"

And Crane stepped up to the little girl, slapped her hand away, and took out the thing she had in her basket.

IT WAS AN IMPACTED node of fantastically involuted code. It shone like a water-polished pebble. Crane's toolkit couldn't even begin to parse it, but when he gave it to Gabriel Hale she shook it lightly and it immediately unfolded in midair. A frame that seemed to lead at right angles to everything else.

"Guy," the lion, Karrier Kulprit, said. "It's there, but it isn't."

Crane checked his toolkit. The hacker was right. The door was the access to an open line that had no physical component. It really was a wormhole, folding together two points in cyberspace. He looked at Gabriel Hale. She shone with an inner light, so bright that he could

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hardly look at her. She seemed bigger, too, although she hadn't changed at all.

"First contact," the lion said, in its querulous teenage voice.

"She went straight to you because you were using the interface you took from her people," Crane said to the little girl. "She wanted to talk, but you were scared. You took her message and you ran away."

"Don't be afraid," Gabriel Hale said. "I remember why I'm here now. Will you come with me?"

"Where?"

"Heaven," jeeves said, and in a rush of straw and foam and polystyrene snow he regrew and gravely bowed to Gabriel Hale.

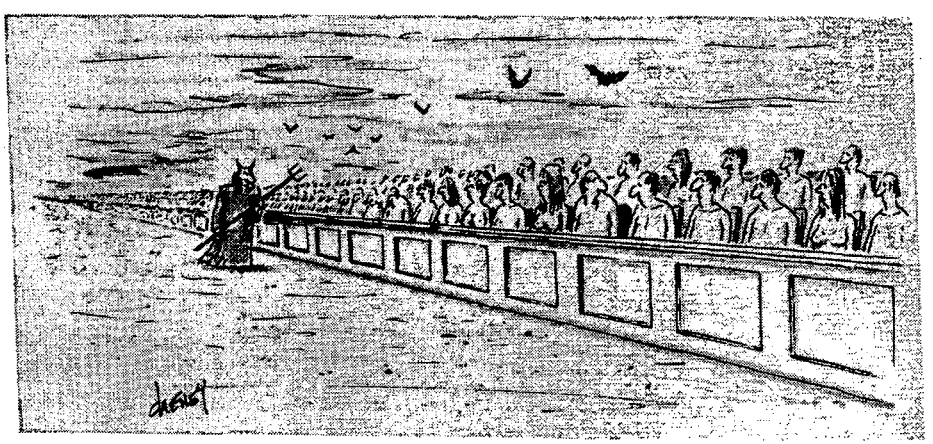
"Tau Ceti," the lion rumbled.

"The end of the world," the little girl said, but there was a note of doubt in her voice, and the light of the messenger shone in her eyes.

"I came here to talk to everyone in the world," Gabriel Hale said. She held out her hands. "And while I'm doing that, I'll take you somewhere wonderful."

Together, the lineman, the little girl, the lion and the agent followed the messenger through the wormhole.

All over Earth billions of phones reset themselves and started to ring.



"I expected it to be bad, but I definitely wasn't ready for eternal jury duty."

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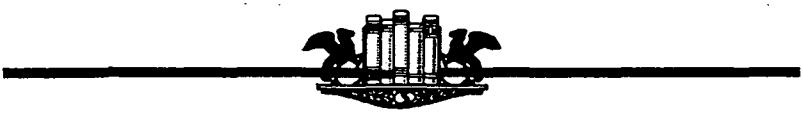

Books To Look For

CHARLES DE LINT

This Body, by Laurel Doud, Little Brown, 1998, $23.95.

THIS BODY opens with its protagonist's death. Katherine Ashley, a middle-aged mother of two, dies in her sleep only to wake up in the body of a twenty-two-year-old alcoholic woman with the implausible name of Thisby Flute Bennet. Doud handles the transition brilliantly, from Katherine's shock and disbelief concerning her predicament, through her gradual acceptance and attempts to make some sense out of what appears to be a second chance at life.

She discovers it's been a year since she (as Katherine) died, and of course she's desperate to know what's happened to her children and husband, then dismayed to discover that he's remarried and life's pretty much carrying on fine without her. The need to contact her old family is strong, but more pressing is the need to make some sense out of Thisby's life, since it's now hers.

Thisby, she finds, was one confused young woman. A photographer, a rebel, an alcoholic, she was unhappy in a life that included a scary boyfriend named Hooker and a strange family that likes to quote Shakespeare at the drop of a hat and appears to have based their family dynamics on *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

Katherine has always been one to take charge of her own life and those around her. But when she tries to do the same in Thisby's life, she ends up being betrayed by the addictions of her new body and the trace memories of its old inhabitant — not to mention the negative light in which everyone views her. How she deals with all of this makes for a riveting and engrossing character study that offers no easy answers but a great deal of real, and very human, insight into who we are and why we are the way we are.

The concept is an old one, but

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Doud does a terrific job of making it fresh again.

253, by Geoff Ryman, St. Martin's Griffin, September 1998, $14.95

I don't quite know where to begin with this book. It's either an elaborate, rather lengthy joke, a piece of serious modern fiction offering insights into the human condition and contemporary social mores, or some odd combination of the two. A joke that turned serious. A piece of serious fiction that discovered its author has his tongue firmly in his cheek.

Consider this. On a London subway traveling between Embankment Station and Elephant & Castle, there are two-hundred-and-fifty-two passengers, plus driver, making up the number which gives the book its title. Ryman proceeds to give each of them a page wherein we learn what they look like, who they are, and what they are thinking.

Each page runs two-hundred-and-fifty-three words, not including titles and footnotes. The material — particularly the characters' thoughts — runs from boring through mildly interesting to quite fascinating, which would pretty much be the breakdown in a real crowd of people this size. As the author tells us at the beginning of the book, "*253* is designed to appeal to the Nosey Parker in all of us. How often have you sat in a restaurant, theatre, or bus and wondered who the people around you are? This novel will give you the illusion that you can know."

And this Ryman proceeds to allow us, resulting in my impressions mentioned above, and frankly it becomes increasingly fascinating, and even poignant, when we reach the final entry, an elderly Anne Frank who thinks she's on a train to Auschwitz. But throughout, in the introductory matter, in the footnotes, in the very way the book is set up, Ryman also takes a jokey tone which appears to be both at odds with the rest of the book, and not.

I should probably add, at this point, that *253* is basically a website in text form (check out the real thing at www.ryman.novel.com), which doesn't explain matters all that much, except for how the book is set up.

Is it a novel? Doubtful. Certainly not in the traditional sense. Is it worth reading? Definitely. Is it the fiction of the future? I hope not. As a one-off, it's entertaining,

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and even thought-provoking, but it took me a long time to read, simply because I kept setting it aside after every half-dozen or so entries to read something with a more coherent narrative. Call me old-fashioned, but I doubt I'd try another.

The Avram Davidson Treasury, edited by Robert Silverberg & Grania Davis, Tor Books, October 1998, $26.95

I think we've discussed this before in these pages, but it bears repeating: we're in grave danger of losing our sense of history. And part of the reason is that the work of the old masters of the field isn't always available to new readers, due to much of it being out of print. What's sad is that these newer readers not only lose the context of important works and authors, but they also miss out on some terrific stories. Not quaint, old-fashioned stories, but powerful, moving ones that will stand the test of time far better than a great deal of contemporary work that is appearing in print for the first time.

Avram Davidson was a giant in the field of fantasy. Perhaps not in sales, but certainly in the quality of his work and how he was viewed by his peers. This new collection will give you a taste of both, reprinting some of his best work, introduced by other luminaries in the field such as Ursula K. Le Guin, Gene Wolfe, Thomas Disch, William Gibson, Gregory Benford, and the like.

The real reason an author like Davidson isn't as widely read as he should be is that he was primarily a writer of short stories, a less-than-popular format for the general reader perhaps, but not so for those of you reading this magazine. If Davidson's work is unfamiliar to you, do yourself a favor and give this book a try. Longtime Davidson readers will enjoy reacquainting themselves with the old favorites collected here, and will also appreciate the insightful tributes introducing each story.

The Silent Strength of Stones, by Nina Kiriki Hoffman, Avon Eos, 1995, 1998, $5.99

I didn't realize until I sat down to write this review that *The Silent Strength of Stones* is a reprint, but since age has nothing to do with a book's quality, and you might have missed this as I did, I thought it was worth mentioning.

For those of you new to Hoffman's work, she writes quirky

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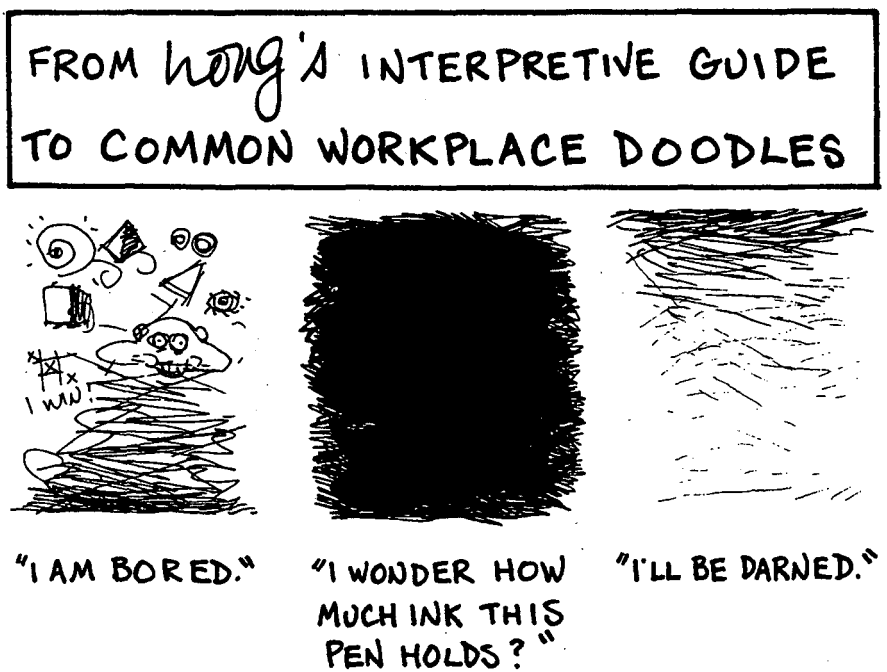
fantasies that brim with warmth and charm. Here she tackles a coming of age story, deftly taking on the voice of Nick Verrou, a young man living in a rural resort town who watches people as a way of dealing with his loneliness. When this year's summer people include a family of witches and a shape-changer, Nick discovers the price of getting involved with others, rather than simply watching them from the sidelines.

The Silent Strength of Stones isn't a big story — the world isn't imperiled, thousands of lives don't hang in the balance — but it's just the right size for what it is: an enchanting glimpse into a summer that changes the life of one young man. Hoffman also has a great take on nature magics and spirits. While I can't talk to them as her characters can, I've felt those presences in wild places, and what she's done feels right.

Material to be considered for review in this column should be sent to Charles de Lint, P.O. Box 9480, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada K1G 3V2. ☞


FROM HONG'S INTERPRETIVE GUIDE
TO COMMON WORKPLACE DOODLES
I WIN!
"I AM BORED."
"I WONDER HOW MUCH INK THIS PEN HOLDS?"
"I'LL BE DARNED."

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BOOKS

ROBERT K.J. KILLHEFFER

Newton's Cannon by J. Gregory Keyes, Del Rey, 1998, $14.

The Iron Bridge by David Morse, Harcourt Brace, 1998, $25.

Darwinia by Robert Charles Wilson, Tor, 1998, $22.95.

"There is only one science in science fiction, and that's history, that's what it's about; it's about nothing else." —William Tenn (Philip Klass), *Locus*, June 1996

A CONSPICUOUS number of sf writers have been looking pastward during the 1980s and 1990s. Tim Powers, James P. Blaylock, and K. W. Jeter come immediately to mind, as do Connie Willis *(Doomsday Book, To Say Nothing of the Dog)* and Karen Joy Fowler *(Sarah Canary)*, and I could list dozens of others. Some, like Willis, use relatively traditional time-travel gimmicks to mingle future and past; others, like Powers, Blaylock, and Jeter, reimagine the past in ways that resemble alternate history — but aren't, quite. They're more like parallel histories, or secret histories. Unlike traditional alternate histories, these scenarios mix and mingle ideas without the mechanical rigor of the "what-if" thought-experiment. They use history the way sf has always used science — as a steamer trunk full of bits and pieces which can be assembled artfully into something fantastic and strange to the mind.

Though Powers, Blaylock, and Jeter have headed into different territory in recent years, the lure of history seems as strong as ever in other writers. J. Gregory Keyes's first two novels *(The Waterborn, The Blackgod)* were more or less traditional quest fantasy, but his latest, *Newton's Cannon*, recalls nothing so much as Jeter's *Infernal Devices*, Blaylock's *Homunculus*, and Powers's *The Drawing of the*

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Dark — with perhaps a little of Orson Scott Card's Alvin Maker books tossed in. It drops us into a reimagined past, an early 18th century in which the theories of alchemists have born practical fruit. In 1681, Isaac Newton discovered the power of something known as "the philosopher's mercury," a substance that transmits vibrations to the æther in which all matter is suspended, allowing a variety of technologies — flameless lamps, beam weapons ("kraftpistoles"), and fax machines ("ætherschreibers"), among others — based on the four elements ("damnatum, lux, phlegm, and gas") and the "ferments" or patterns in which they are arranged, às well as the "affinities" between them. Some affinities, such as gravity, are very general — all forms of matter share it — while others exist only between twin objects, such as two halves of a pane of glass.

This world is populated by figures we know well from our own, principally Benjamin Franklin, the central character, whose natural genius for invention shows itself just as clearly in this world as it did in our own. It's a very appealing and colorful setting, and Keyes evokes it expertly — not too much exposition, but enough detail (most of the time) to give us the flavor of a living world. At first *Newton's Cannon* suffers a little from a tone of ingenuousness that makes it feel a bit like a book for young adults, but thankfully the story gains in worldliness and complexity of feeling as it goes along.

As with the early books of Powers *et al.*, *Newton's Cannon* is essentially an adventure tale, driven by a compelling plot more than by the intricacies of characterization. With his early inventions, Franklin stumbles into a world of deadly politics in which the king of France has his philosophers hard at work at creating a weapon they call Newton's Cannon, a weapon of such fearsome power that they're certain it will save France from the steady advance of the English armies that have harried it for decades. At the same time, Franklin runs afoul of even more dangerous entities, beings which seem to live in the æther itself and are unhappy with the direction Franklin's experiments are taking. His life is threatened; his brother killed; he flees Boston, meets the pirate Blackbeard, and makes his way to London, where he falls in with a group of Newton's students, and events hurry toward their climax: Will the French build Newton's Cannon? Will it destroy England?

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If *Newton's Cannon* lacks anything that its forebears had, it's a kind of thickness, a depth of vision. Now and then one wishes for a little more information than Keyes provides, perhaps a scholarly digression à la Umberto Eco to enrich the reader's feel for the alchemical technology that fills the book. Keyes could have risked a heavier infusion of alchemical references; it would have made *Newton's Cannon* a book to rank alongside those of Blaylock, Powers, and Jeter. Perhaps the next volume of this series — at least one more is promised — will bring that extra weight to bear, and transport us to an imagined place not only detailed enough to be believable, but rich enough to be lost in.

In *The Iron Bridge*, first novelist David Morse gives us all those things missing from *Newton's Cannon*. Morse sets his story in the real 18th century, the one that saw the explosion of technological invention and social change that would transform Europe — and the world — via the Industrial Revolution.

That transformation is the central issue of the book. The world it leads to — our own — has become a wasteland by the middle of the 21st century. Pockets of humanity eke out an existence not yet wholly barbarous but increasingly precarious, and outside the islands of civility life is brutal. Hardly an uncommon premise, and Morse's storyline is pretty familiar, too: One of these enclaves has discovered how to send a member of the community back in time, and so Maggie Foster makes the trip, abandoning her lover, her friends, and all she knows for a chance to prevent the catastrophe that has ruined their world. If she's lucky, smart, and careful, she might impede the path of industry — not halt it, but slow it enough to allow human wisdom to grow along with technology, and so avert industry's most devastating consequences.

The familiarity of this scenario and its obvious emotional buttons ripe for pushing might have made for a callow novel, but Morse distinguishes his treatment of the hallowed sf concepts with an extraordinarily deft and subtle approach. This isn't the Time Police zooming in on antigrav thrusters, nor even the madcap brilliance of Connie Willis's *To Say Nothing of the Dog*. In its sensitivity to character and its warmly, lovingly detailed setting, *The Iron Bridge* is much closer to Willis's award-winning *Doomsday Book* — every bit as

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impressive and moving, if not more so.

Morse's sense of subtlety begins with Maggie's target. She's not after some grand event, bringing Britain a victory in the American Revolution or anything like that, but an event most people today wouldn't even recognize — the construction of the first iron bridge, which took place at Coalbrookdale, Shropshire, in the late 1770s. It's an important moment, because it demonstrated the versatility and power of iron at a critical moment, launching us into the true Iron Age in which we are still living. To a reader with a passion for history, Morse's choice strikes the perfect chord — it recognizes the power of small moments and, more importantly, that the real seeds of historical change often lie in the symbolic significance of events more than in their immediate material effects. What matters is how events change the way people *think*, as that first iron bridge did.

As we follow Maggie's efforts to alter the construction plans, the narrative splits into several viewpoints — we watch through Maggie's eyes, and those of the Quaker Abraham Darby III (owner of England's largest ironworks) and those of John Wilkinson, the unscrupulous cannon maker who schemes to ensure that the bridge gets built — but at Darby's expense. Such is Morse's skill that even Wilkinson becomes, if not exactly sympathetic, at least full and lifelike enough not to be easily hated. Morse's fascination with his subject and the richly drawn setting make it all that real and riveting — many a veteran sf writer would be proud if their lumps of exposition could be as interesting as Morse's descriptions of ironmaking.

The emotional power of *The Iron Bridge* also comes from the subtleties. He wrings our hearts through Maggie Foster's agonies of conscience, Abraham Darby's yearning for the farmer's life, and the raft of everyday sufferings and struggles of the people of Coalbrookdale, not through the devastation of some vast catastrophe. But what most sets *The Iron Bridge* apart from a novel like *Newton's Cannon* is its thematic spine. The action of the novel corresponds to the exploration of a theme, a question, an idea — in fact, many of these at once. Can the course of history be changed? Is it morally right to change it? Are there immutable ills in the human spirit that will doom our species to self-destruction? *The Iron Bridge* is a

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magnificent book, and its magic lies in how it simultaneously offers a heart-rending story and fuel for some very deep intellectual pondering.

Robert Charles Wilson's latest novel, *Darwinia*, provides its own share of historical questions to ponder, similar to those of *The Iron Bridge*. Wilson jump-starts his narrative with a device he's used in previous books (such as *The Harvest*), a sweeping, sudden, inexplicable Change that remakes the world in an instant. In *Darwinia*, the change comes in March 1912 and erases Europe and sections of Asia and Africa, obliterating all signs of humanity and even all terrestrial plant and animal life, replacing everything with an alien landscape of exotic flora and fauna unlike anything else on the planet. In an eyeblink, the Old World is gone, and the rest of the world is plunged into the chaos that might be expected. Economies crash, refugees abound, the far-flung empires of Britain, France, and Germany crumble (though the Britons rally to a degree behind a determined Lord Kitchener) — and, perhaps most significantly, the tenets of science and rationalism, beginning to take firm root in the Western mind, are suddenly cast into doubt. The change, which comes to be called "the Miracle," suggests the mighty hand of God, refuting Darwin and his followers in one neat stroke.

So from the very first pages *Darwinia* sets up a scenario to plumb some of the same issues as *The Iron Bridge*. It's no accident that the Miracle occurs in the very month before, in our world, the *Titanic* sank and itself threw the certainties of the Industrial Age into flux. Wilson's main character, Guilford Law, is a kid when the Miracle sweeps over the world. He's described as a child of "the new century," full of faith in reason, science, and technology; "a twentieth-century person, privately scornful of the dusty past, the gaslight and mothball past." As he grows up, he remains convinced that what's happened, however strange, is not a contradiction of science — it's a mystery, but not a miracle. He sets out with an expedition to explore the unknown interior of the changed Europe, leaving his wife and child to await him in the frontier-town London that's being rebuilt along the wild Thames.

The Miracle and Law's expedition provide an excellent opportunity for Wilson to probe the science

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versus religion debate. The leader of the expedition is Preston Finch, a post-Miracle naturalist whose books have argued for a Creationist interpretation of geological features, proof of the Great Flood, and other religiously inspired theories. But what they find as they explore is hard for him to explain. There's as much evidence in favor of Darwinian evolution in the creatures of the changed world as there was in the old — a different evolution, but operating along the same lines. Finch retains his convictions, but others in the group find their faith challenged. The botanist Sullivan responds to Finch's persistent belief in miracle with increasing impatience: "How I would love to have an explanation so wonderfully complete!... To look at the color of Mars in the night sky, at six-legged fur-bearing snakes laying eggs in the snow, and see nothing but the hand of God.... But I won't put my ignorance on an altar and call it God." We get some insight into Finch's continued faith when he admits he finds the thought of a world without the certainties of religion "chaos, horror." But Law replies as a good rationalist: "Maybe it only looks that way because we're ignorant." And, as it turns out, he's right.

As the book proceeds, Wilson also evokes other interesting questions. With Europe gone and most other parts of the world (Russia, China, Africa) damaged in the Miracle, America is left standing alone on the world stage as early as 1920, and the course of events thereafter invites us to wonder not merely what science and technology have wrought in our time, but what the United States has done itself, and where we might have ended up without the influence of the Old World. Post-Miracle America isn't a pretty sight: it's small-minded, parochial, and reactionarily religious. Americans indulge themselves in the thought that Europeans somehow brought the Miracle down upon themselves like Sodom and Gomorrah; the culture of old Europe, from music to art to literature, receives universal disdain. Coming as this does from the viewpoint of a Canadian writer, this analysis seems particularly trenchant. In many ways Wilson's alternate America embodies the worst impulses we can see in our nation today.

As with *The Iron Bridge*, Wilson's novel balances its wealth of provocative questions and ideas with a solid sense of the complex joys and sadnesses of real life, and

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this balance is vital to the book's success. *Darwinia* serves up some big sf thrills and ideas—the Miracle and its explanation, which draws on the speculations of contemporary physicists such as Frank Tipler, John D. Barrow, and Lee Smolin—but these wonders would have paled, I think, as the wonders of *Ringworld* paled after its initial flash of amazement, without the humanistic angle to keep it compelling. The more Law learns about the truth behind the Miracle, the less he seems to like it, as if Wilson's suggesting that scientific understanding carries with it a weight of responsibility that can make it difficult to enjoy the native experiences of quotidian human life. And even the vast construct that explains the Miracle and the world Law lives in may have its origins in human feeling more than simple technological determinism: late in the book, Law wonders "if that was why the gods had built their Archive in the first place: this mortal unwillingness to surrender the past, lose love to crumbling atoms."

Thus it is for today's sf writers, unwilling to give up the past in their pursuit of the future. Like the best sf about the future, sf about the past uses its trunk of materials to construct imaginary worlds that are lenses through which we can view our own and ponder it in ways less imaginative fiction cannot suggest. Pastward-looking sf proves (if it still needs proving) that the heart of sf lies not in its trappings but in its methods, its way of looking at the world. And by claiming the past as fertile territory for sf, these writers ensure that we don't forget where we've been as we rush ahead toward wherever we're going.

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The pertinent question here in Robin Aurelian's latest sf story appears to be "How much do you want?" The answer, of course, is best left as an exercise for the reader.

A Choice of Graces

By Robin Aurelian

"WOMEN! WORRIED? TIRED? Frustrated? At a Dead End? Ready for excitement of a new and different kind? Send your picture and a brief biography to our catalog. We'll connect you with someone who can take care of all your needs!"

Sally brushed sweaty bangs off her forehead and blinked a few times to clear her eyes. All around her, dryers and washing machines whirled, chugged, and rattled. The air was full of the clashing scents of different fabric softeners. By the Launderland door, silhouetted against the blazing day outside, two children wrestled over a toy truck and snarled at each other.

Sally smoothed the slip of slick white plastic she had found below the detergent dispensing machine and read the ad on it again. It pretty much described her mental state. She glanced at a nearby dryer, saw her plain white cotton underpants sliding around Norm's black-with-scarlet-hearts faux-silk boxers. False advertising, at least on his part. There was nothing hot, red, and exciting in Norm's pants.

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And he surely generated more than his fair share of work. Sally experienced a stab of fury at Norm's sweat glands. He could wear things once and they stank for days. Another flare of fury passed through her as she thought about Norm's ability to tolerate his own odor much longer than Sally could. He was also impervious to dirty dishes and empty ice trays. There had been a time in their relationship when Sally found this endearing. There was so much she could do for him. He needed her.

Now she spent a lot of time grinding her teeth.

She slipped the strip of plastic into her shorts pocket and forgot about it.

Norm brought her roses. She couldn't figure out why. A dozen dark red roses: in the humid summer heat of the evening, their heavy rich scent filled the room.

"Thank you," she said, six times. Was it their anniversary? They didn't have a real one. They'd only been living together a year and a half. Why would he bring her roses?

She leaned over them and sniffed. Rarely did florists' roses have this strong spicy scent. "This is so sweet, Norm," Sally said. *What do you want*? she managed not to say, but she surely thought it loud and clear. *What do you want*? *What have you done*? *What am I supposed to forgive you for*?

Norm just smiled and kissed her. "Thanks for everything, honey. You're wonderful."

Part of her melted into a pool of Silly Putty, and another part maintained its suspicious vigilance.

Later, after they had made love and she had the sinking feeling she had now earned those flowers, she lay thinking as Norm slept beside her.

Why should she suspect him of something when maybe he was just being nice? When was the last time she had done something nice for Norm just to surprise him? Did she view everything about their relationship with resentment and suspicion?

Was this what she wanted to do with her life?

Later, when she was gathering up another laundry load from the hamper and found a crumpled shirt of Norm's with someone else's perfume on it, despair swamped her.

She hadn't wanted to be right.

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* * *

She went to a digital photobooth and had a picture made up, herself in a Wanted poster. She wrote a fake biography. "I worked three years as a caboose engineer and six months as a stripper. I did one tour of duty as a mess cook on a submarine. Lately I have made my living having knives thrown at me in a circus act. Magnifico the knife-thrower has only missed once, when he hit me on the inside of my thigh. The scar is quite small, but every time I hear that whish of a knife through air I think it might happen again, and I kind of like that."

After she assembled her bio and photo, she sat and stared at the white plastic strip with the want ad and the address on it.

What kind of people put an ad like this on a piece of plastic and stuck it in the launderland? What sort of answers were they expecting? What did they do when they got them? What if it was some weird female slavery thing, or some other kind of scam? Send us ten thousand dollars and we'll find your dream lover?

She could always stop before it came to spending money. She could always refuse if some stranger called her up and asked her to meet him alone. Right?

She touched one of last night's guilt roses, then folded up her photo and bio and put them in an envelope. Address. Stamp.

She walked to the mailbox on the corner and hesitated before dropping the envelope in.

Really, she had a comfortable life. She worked thirty hours a week at a packing company job where she didn't have to dress in pantyhose. Norm worked more and paid most of the bills. Sure, he was a slob, but his apartment had a nice view of the lake, and his mother almost never visited. What did she have to complain about? Lots of people would like to have it as good as she had it. The bum at the corner whom she gave fifty cents to most days would probably love this life. Maybe he would get along with Norm better, too.

Worried. Tired. Frustrated. At a dead end. Ready for excitement.

Sally opened the mailbox and dropped the letter in.

Norm answered the call.

Sally didn't realize. She was in the kitchen, chopping green peppers

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and tomatoes for salad when the phone rang. It was usually for him, so she let him pick up.

"Oh, really?" Norm said in the living room. "What gave you that idea?"

And then, a little later, "Oh, really?" in a voice that wavered between anger and despair.

"Oh, really? I think not," Norm said.

Sally put down her knife and stepped out of the kitchen. Norm was flushed, his eyes narrowed. As she watched, his forehead flushed even darker rose. "Where did you — what are you — ?"

It came to her suddenly. He had answered the phone, but it was for her, and he wasn't going to tell her.

She strode across the room and took the phone from him. "Hello?"

"Ah," said a faintly accented voice, a light honey tenor. "Ms. Sally Norris?"

"That's right."

"You sent us that delightful response to our request."

"Uh," said Sally. She hadn't planned to pursue this with Norm in the same room.

"Is this a bad time?"

"Uh-huh," Sally said.

"Your knifethrower is there," said the voice. She heard an edge of laughter in it that maybe wasn't there.

"Uh-huh."

"Would there be a better time to call, say, tomorrow?"

"Uh-huh."

"Morning?"

"Uh-huh."

"Shall we say, perhaps, ten A.M.?"

"Uh-huh."

"It's an assignation, then. We greatly enjoyed your bio, Ms. Norris."

"Thanks."

"Ta ta."

"Uh-huh." Sally hung up the phone.

"What the hell is going on here?" Norm yelled.

Sally didn't say much during the fight that followed. Mostly she

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listened. Norm said all kinds of things that made her wonder how long he had been suspicious of her. Maybe that was why he slept around. He thought she was already doing it. It had never entered her mind.

I'm glad I sent that letter.

Sally slept in the living room that night. She tried to convince herself that the convertible sofa was actually comfortable. It didn't work, but she did eventually get a fragment of sleep.

Norm was out of the house the next morning without a word, and Sally vacuumed and waited for the phone to ring. She didn't have to go in to work until one in the afternoon.

Ring. "Ms. Norris?"

"Speaking," she said. This voice was different from the one yesterday. It was a woman. She sounded like she was smiling.

"Apple Blossoms Adventures of a Lifetime here," said the woman's voice. "Worlds to offer you, no strings attached."

"You mean there are actually positions where my job skills would be useful?" Sally couldn't believe it. Let alone she didn't really have any of the job skills she had described.

"We appreciate your spirit," said the woman. "Are you really, truly fed up with your current position, to the point that you would take a big chance?"

That was the question. *How desperate am I?* A sigh whooshed out of her. Sally sat on the sofa, which she had reconverted into a sitting surface. Something bumped her hip. She dug around under the sofa cushion and came up with her hairbrush. Among the dishwater blonde strands caught in the bristles, she found three gray hairs, and thought, *I could spend the rest of my life here.*

"I'm ready," she told the voice on the phone.

"Do you have a lot of material possessions you feel you need to take with you, should you move?"

She thought of the rented storage space where she had put the pieces of her parents' furniture she really liked when they had moved to Florida and wanted to start with all new furnishings in their fabulous new apartment. The set of dishes that had belonged to her grandmother, a few quilts and photo albums. A cardboard box full of her student compositions, going all the way back to the highway-stitched triple-lined paper of

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first grade. Several boxes of books she had loved but never had time to reread. A woodcarving that had belonged to her grandfather, depicting a red-nosed drunk leaning against a lamppost: when you wound a key in the base of the carving, the drunk bobbed his head and whistled, "Did You Ever See a Lassie Go This Way and That?"

She could leave all those things in storage.

She glanced around Norm's apartment. She had clothes and toiletries here, and two houseplants that would die as soon as she left. She had put a Rembrandt print up over the couch when she first moved in, but Norm had moved it to the study, where neither of them ever went. The new towels and washrags she had bought for her and Norm to share? That one kitchen knife she really liked?

She said, "I don't have that much stuff, actually. I have some things in storage, but I don't need them right away."

"We can maintain that account for you indefinitely," said the woman.

Sally said, "I mean, I'll want them when I get my own house. How long does this job last?"

"A lifetime, if you're lucky. You can send for your things later and the company will forward them."

"What kind of work are we talking about?"

"Come in for an interview, Ms. Norris. I promise you'll find it rewarding."

THE OFFICE was lined with plush: purple on the ceiling, pink on the walls, and crimson on the floor. There were no windows. The furniture looked like fuzzy, pastel-colored mushrooms at various heights. A man and a woman in pale blue pantsuits with high pointed collars sat on two low mushroom-colored mushrooms with a broad, slightly taller taupe mushroom before them, shielding their laps. Two low truffle-brown mushrooms stood in front of the broad one.

Sally stood in the oval doorway, wondering why this place looked like a sixties bordello nightmare.

The woman smiled at her, and the man beckoned her forward. "Don't worry," he said, in that same light tenor, "we don't bite." His smile revealed bright flat-edged teeth.

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Sally looked behind her at the dingy, ordinary corridor of a downtown office building. No waiting room. No secretary or receptionist. Talk about fly-by-night.

"Is not the contrast amusing?" asked the woman.

"What kind of outfit are you guys running?" Sally asked. Some cheap stunt! How could she trust her future to people with taste this bad?

"Our primary headquarters are much better looking," said the man, smiling. "This is a temporary outpost."

"Uh...what, exactly, do you do?" Sally asked.

"We find people ready to have adventures, and then we supply the adventures!" said the woman. Her green gaze and warm tone mesmerized Sally in a snaky way. "We have an adventure specially selected for you already, though your advantage profile is so high we could find more than one suitable destination for you. Are you ready for a whole...new... *life*?" She sounded like a preacher who had reached the sermon's punchline.

"What?"

"Just say yes," the man said. "You're exactly the type of client we specialize in!"

"Who *are* you people? What kind of con game are you running?"

"There's nothing phony about what we're doing," said the man. "We match people with adventure. That's all there is to it!"

"People? The ad said women," Sally said. She chewed her lower lip, then stepped all the way into the room. A door slid out of the wall and whooshed shut, just like the ones on *Star Trek*. It was covered with lavender plush and had no handle. She stepped toward it. It didn't whoosh open again. She glanced over her shoulder at the smiling man and woman.

"Have a seat," the man suggested gently.

Well, those two would have to leave sometime. They would have to open the door. She would get out. Still, she felt totally trapped.

She went over and sat on one of the mushrooms. It was warm and bent gently under her. She felt as though she were sitting on slightly solid warm water.

"Sally," said the woman, "the truth is, we are recruiting only women. Women have the qualities we need."

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"What exactly does that mean?" Sally shifted, and the mushroom conformed to her new position. Comfortable but unnerving.

"We'll tell you more when you're committed to your new life!" the woman said.

"Oh, no, you don't," Sally protested. "I'm not saying yes to anything without reading the fine print."

The man smiled forlornly at her, blinked suddenly tear-brimmed eyes. "Well, we'll have to say good-bye, then. Such a shame. You're an excellent prospect for the highest grade adventure we offer."

Sally struggled to her feet. "Where did you get this furniture?" she asked. She wished she had mushrooms like this at home, no matter how tacky they looked.

"You can't get that around here," said the woman. "But it's standard issue in the living quarters where you would have been going."

"Too bad," Sally said. She had been wondering if a bed made out of a giant mushroom would feel like this, and imagining rolling around on one with Norm. She headed for the door. If it would just open as she approached, this could make an okay exit. Woman acts in her own best interests. Period.

"There's nothing more you can tell me?" she asked, turning back.

"Where I want to send you," said the woman, "you would have servants to take care of all household chores, access to your favorite foods, literature, television programs, and movies, and all the furniture acts like these comfichairs."

"How can I be sure you're telling the truth?"

"You can't," said the man. "You'll have to trust your instincts."

Her instincts had led her to Herb, and Jacob, and Petey, and Norm. To doing extra laundry and filling ice trays and cleaning shaving stubble out of sinks and waking up to find she was in the wrong place with the wrong person again. Some instincts.

Then again, what else did she have to work with?

She stared at the man and woman. Studied their strange pantsuits. Not from around here, she thought. Definitely. What kind of material was that, slick and shiny but not exactly vinyl? Were the man's eyes really silver? Did the woman's skin have a faint green tinge to it? That spot in the middle of her forehead: megazit or vestigial third eye? Why

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was the man hiding his hands under the big mushroom?

"How much torture and pain is involved in this job?" Sally asked.

"How much do you want?" asked the woman.

The man went back to Norm's apartment with Sally after she had set her hand on some slick flesh-colored surface that the woman called a contract. "Just point to anything you want to take with you," he said. Sally stared at the stereo for a minute. Technically, it was Norm's, but she used it a lot more than he did.

"Don't worry about that," said the man. "You'll have a much better sound system, and access to almost everything ever recorded in any medium."

"Cool," said Sally. She took him to the bedroom and started to pull her clothes down from the hangers.

He fingered a pink summer dress with a small stain on the front. "Do you really want this?"

"I have to have clothes."

"Just take a few things. You'll get a whole new and more appropriate wardrobe when you get there. What do you have here that's really meaningful to you, that you'd feel heartsick if you lost, that you can't live without?"

In the end Sally had a small stack that included sixteen hardback books, the contents of the spice cabinet, assorted packets of tea, and a sack with everything from her two bathroom drawers in it. "Will I be able to get Pantene Pro-V conditioning shampoo there?"

"Take a sample with you," he said. "They'll synthesize it. You might find you like the local product more."

Her little jewelry box, with its few bits of gold and silver and the small diamond ring her father had given her for her sixteenth birthday; her camera and three rolls of outdated film; a stuffed teddy bear a boy had won for her at a carnival when she was fourteen; the six diaries she had actually written in scattershot across the years.

Sally studied her possessions. "It's pathetic, isn't it?"

"It's perfect," he said. He took a small copper device out of a pocket in his pantsuit, held it up in front of his eye as though it were a camera, and clicked something. Her whole collection of life glowed and shrank

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until it could all fit into a quart-size Ziploc bag. He took out a quart-sized Ziploc bag and dropped all her things inside it, then sealed it shut.

"Ba-ba-but — "

He handed her the bag. "Hang onto this. When you get to your new posting, they'll have an enlarging ray there. Don't worry about breaking anything. Shrinks and protects."

HE WAS WAITING when she stepped out of the shuttle onto the sparkling green pavement of the terminal. He had three stumpy legs and six or eight tentacular arms, and his head was covered with a forest of thinner, longer tentacles that rose and pointed their sucker-dotted tips toward her. Two of his eyes lit up when he saw her; the other five shifted color. She didn't yet know what this meant.

For a moment she stood, hugging herself and shivering, even though the air was dense, damp, and warm. She had learned his language and customs through sleep induction on the journey here, but she didn't want to chance the first word. What if she got it wrong?

"You're everything I dreamed of," he said.

She smiled. Then wondered if that was an acceptable expression here. Then took the next six steps toward him and stood quietly while he folded his arms around her.

"Natomis," she said. His name.

Just tell me that you're not the next Norm, she thought.

He lifted her and walked, stump stump stump, out of the terminal, carrying her above his head like a trophy. Others' head tentacles turned to study her, and she heard a flow of subsonics in the air around her — men language, which she had not been taught. She watched colors shift across her new man's skin, wondered if they were pride-sign colors. Sometimes he turned her this way and that in front of another of his kind, and the subsonics intensified.

She smiled and smiled without showing teeth, and listened for the whish of the next knife flying through air.

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Michael Bishop's most recent books include Time Pieces, *a collection of his poetry, and he is half of the "Philip Lawson" team who wrote the mystery novel* Would It Kill You to Smile? *(The other half of that team keeps scattering wingéd-horse feathers around here.) The duo has finished a follow-up mystery that currently bears the curious title* Muskrat Courage.

This poem appeared previously in the Quality Paperback Book Club's Calendar of Days, *but we found this tribute to the late Mr. Dick irresistible.*

By Michael Bishop

Philip K. Dick Is Dead, a Lass

with dark hair said. Her tears flowed wholesale,
remember? Phil wrote like a relentless dentist,
drilling the pocked enamel of reality to expose
its beautiful decay. Midway through the wood
he popped fish-shaped paranoia pills, chewed
the holy fat of messianic redemption, & chased
the godly lot with pot after pot of hot black
coffee, all of it decanted from percolators whoop-
whoop-whooping their projective derangement. Beer
furred his tongue. Mars floated mauve in his
eyeballs. The smell of ozone-depleting aerosols

wafted from his armpits, ubiquitously. When Anwar
Sadat died, he scarred himself with a can of Orange
Crush in spontaneous homage. He took courage
when Linda Ronstadt sang "Different Drum" & no
bleak umbrage if a buddy crooned "*Una cosa me da
risa — Pancho Villa sin camisa.*" He was fully sane
in Berkeley, Fullerton, & Santa Ana. He was crazy
in California. Kafka had nothing on either Philip
K. or the latest demented broadcast from Radio Free

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Albemuth. (Oh, to be a Blobel!) If he wakes as
a Brobdignagian beefsteak tomato to orbit Papa,

an angrily expanding sun, take cover. "Not 'rekal'
but *re*call," the receptionist corrects him. He
readies himself for Papa's apotheosis with a jolt
of Nov(a)cain. He essayed suicide because Elijah
left him. "*There is nothing worse in the world,*
no punishment greater, than to have known God
and no longer to know him." To eulogize Phil
properly, recall from the post-apocalyptic junkyard
a menagerie of maimed automata — ersatz sheep, a robot
German shepherd, a naggish simulacrum of Secretariat —
and a crew of pertinacious little people, from Lumky

to Isidore to Tagomi, then set them singing until
they entropically abort. As calm as caffeine, Phil
fled aboard a talking taxi to Sri Lanka, suffered
in remainderdom, elbowed Norman Mailer for a side
of macaroni, was rediscovered, restored to print,
cultified, read, reread, & queried. If we want
him to digest it, we'll have to eat his celebrity
for him. The ambulance that hauled him to hospital
babbled beneath its wailing like his long-dead baby
sister while a blue-zillion rusty percolators whooped
in aromatic chorus for the conveyence of his soul.

for Phil, dead on March 2, 1982

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Laurel Winter's last story for us was "Fighting Gravity" back in September. She reports that much of her energy these days is going into her new passion, painting, and that she's working on an sf novel for kids. This new fantasy tells the story of a quiet young girl's coming of age and of a special woman known as...

Sky Eyes

By Laurel Winter

THE FIRST TIME I MET SKY Eyes, I thought she was blind. Her eyes were clouded white-blue, with no black circles in the middle, no white background. I thought she was blind, and then she looked at me and saw that I was seven years old and my mother was sick with something that ate her until her arms were brown sticks and my father wouldn't admit it and I wanted everything to be back the way it was, but knew — even then — that it could never be that way again.

I don't know how I knew this, but I did.

She also saw that I had been sent to her against my will to bring back some healing potion to cure my mother or, more likely, some soothing potion to help her die. This latter she gave me, a slender, black vial, accepting the single coin from my small, brown hand, but the knowledge in her cloudy eyes held me. She saw that we were just come to the village and not likely to move on. And she saw deeper — the strange patterns of thought in my child mind, that I had taken care to hide even from my mother.

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"Oh, Jamillah, the person you could be," she said, touching my chin with a cool finger. "Are you brave enough? Are you cold enough?"

I ran then, without words, but she didn't seem to mind. "You'll come back," she called.

Never, I told myself, frightened in a way that made my very bones quiver beneath my flesh. How had she known my name? I wanted to dash the vial of soothing potion against a rock, for I could feel peaceful death within it. I would have smashed it, too, but for the fact that I could also feel painful death whenever I touched my mother. Old knowledge, for a child of seven, that caught in my throat. Sometimes I didn't speak for days.

I was the one who fed my mother the potion, a drop at a time. The neck of the vial was just large enough to admit my smallest finger, let it emerge, glistening. Her lips held what smile they could as I touched the finger to her tongue. Then her eyes would glaze slightly, as the pain left her. And a bit of her life went, too.

The vial didn't last as long as she did. I couldn't bear to give more than a single drop, couldn't bear the sleep that so mimicked death when I gave her two drops in quick succession. She lingered and I was sent back to Sky Eyes with the empty vial. This time we hadn't even a coin.

People talked when they saw me slowly walking up the street with the black vial in my hands. People always talk as if children cannot hear, or, if they do hear, cannot understand. Since I hadn't spoken for weeks now, and no one believed I would again, they didn't even bother to lower their voices.

"That poor, strange child."

"What her parents are thinking, sending her to that witch...."

"Ah, but she's a girl, so she should be safe. I don't allow my son to even speak to that woman."

"What will happen to the child when the mother dies?"

By then my cold feet had taken me to the door of Sky Eyes's hut. The black, empty vial gleamed in my hand. Before I could knock on the rough wood the door opened to me. "Come in," she said. "No need to stand in the cold — or listen to poisonous gossip." This last she said clearly, in a voice that carried to at least three of the gossipers. They walked swiftly away whispering to each other.

She led me in to the flickering warmth, but my shivers did not

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decrease. Her eyes were clear, pale blue — winter sky blue — without the clouds that had drifted through them before. I moved my mouth to ask why, but the sounds had forgotten how to come out. No matter; she knew my question.

She gave the merest shrug. "No one knows, least of all I. Some say my mother spent too much time looking at the sky when she was carrying me inside, looking at the sky and wishing to be somewhere other than where she was. And then I was born and she was." She paused for a bare moment and continued matter-of-factly. "My mother died when I was born. At least you've had yours for seven years."

I stared at her. No matter how many people whispered about my mother's impending death behind my back, to my face it was always, "...when your mother gets better...." Even my father, when he sent me for this soothing, killing potion, sent me with lies about medicine to make her strong, make her well. But I knew, and so did my mother, and so did Sky Eyes. I gravely held out the vial.

"Poor child," she said, taking it in a small, neat hand. "You couldn't bear to end it quickly, could you?"

Pain filled me.

"The best thing is usually the hard thing," she said. She went to a stained wooden table and anchored the vial in a lump of reddish clay. She stuck a small funnel into the slender black neck. "If it's too easy — like telling a child her mother will live instead of admitting she'll be dust before the month is out — " She poured a thin, gleaming stream into the mouth of the funnel, a mere thread of liquid. "If it's too easy, it's likely wrong."

She quit pouring almost as soon as she'd begun, when even an inexperienced child could tell the vial was nowhere near full. She took the funnel out and placed it in a basin of water. She rinsed her hands and dried them on her gray skirt.

"Can you remember that?" she whispered, seating the stopper firmly before handing the vial back to me. "The best thing is usually the hard thing."

Traces of clay marked the black. I didn't have to nod to show her I would always remember; she knew. She closed her eyes and was an ordinary woman, tired, but with traces of beauty that nothing could erase. "Go now," she said. "Be quick or the cold will eat your feet."

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She hadn't mentioned payment, and I scurried for the door, half afraid she would demand a coin I didn't have, but she was silent. As I left though, she whispered, just loud enough for me to hear, "Come back to me."

I didn't linger on the way home, although the tiny vial felt heavy to me, as though it contained an entire world.

My father let me into our room, which had one bed, continuously occupied by my mother. When he slept, which wasn't often, he crept next to the wall and made himself as thin as possible. I slept next to the fire atop a folded blanket and beneath my mother's cloak. The room smelled sick, stale, hopeless, but somehow the cloak had retained a warm, sheep smell. Aside from the clothes we wore, our few belongings were stacked near the wall, still packed in bundles. Something about that made me uneasy, but Father could not be bothered to think about them. We had been traveling toward Shaboor when Mother's sickness had demanded we stop; he still maintained that we would be going on soon, soon, when she was a little stronger. He spent all his time with her, stroking her face with his fingers or laying cool cloths on her forehead — switching to hot when cool did no good. Nothing did any good. She just lay there dying.

She was awake now, her lips drawn back in a grimace of pain, too weak even to weep. "You have the medicine, Jamillah?" Father asked. "She gave it to you?"

I nodded.

"Quickly, then. The waiting is so hard for her."

I went toward the bed, but I couldn't force my feet to move quickly. The best thing is usually the hard thing. My father gave me a little shove. "She's waiting."

I stood by the bed and looked for her smile, but it had been eaten away by the pain. The lines in her face belonged to a woman who had lived her whole life and was ready to die. The best thing...I lifted the vial and she moved her lips. I moved my own, trying to bring words out. *Goodbye. I love you. Please tell me what to do.* Neither of us could speak, though. I leaned over and kissed her wasted cheek. The hard thing...I removed the stopper and tilted the vial, watching the thick, shining potion trickle into her mouth.

Father watched me from the middle of the room. He knew what I was

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doing, but he just stood and watched until it was too late and then he ran to the bed with a cry and snatched the vial. "What are you doing? You are giving her too much."

He slapped me, hard, which he had never done before. I buried myself in the wool of Mother's cloak and let my tears lead me into sleep.

SOMETIME in the night, while I slept, my mother died and my father left. I awoke to angry voices in the hall. "— gone and she's dead and that child without a tongue in her head. What are we supposed to do with her?"

I didn't want to open my eyes, but I couldn't stop myself. My mother lay terribly still in the bed, with her hands arranged across her chest. The bundles were gone. All that was left was me and the cloak I slept under. And the black, empty vial on the night table.

The fire was out; the air against my face cold. I wanted to silence my ears as well as my voice, but the argument in the hall continued to invade.

"She could sweep up and scrub the pots perhaps."

"I will not have her here! Do you know what she did?"

"She's a mere child." The fat man who did his wife's bidding; he'd slipped me sweets before when she wasn't looking.

It was the wife, the innkeeper herself, who hissed now. "She killed her own mother."

Suddenly there was no warmth in the cloak, no warmth left in my body. I began to shiver violently.

"Now, you can't know that."

"When I was up to start the bread, I heard him crying, 'what has she done, what has she done?' and then this morning the woman is dead and the daughter left behind with the empty poison bottle. Maybe we could sell her to pay the bill for the burial and the room."

There was still no warmth in the world, but I stood and drew the cloak around me. It dragged on the rough floor. I walked past the bed that held my silent mother and went to the window. It opened easily, I knew, for we had frequently tried to air the room of the sick smell — never successfully — despite the winter.

Our room was on the ground floor, looking into a narrow alley. I

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pulled myself up on the frame and swung my legs through. The cloak caught on a loose nail. When I pulled it free, a long curl of wool ripped off. Then I was gone, leaving my mother to the cold. I don't know what the innkeepers said when they found I was gone, but I imagine they were relieved for different reasons: he that he wasn't forced to deal with the idea of selling me, and she that she wasn't forced to deal with me at all.

I had never come out through the alley before. The backs of the buildings — unpainted, rough — were much different than the fronts. The wind whistled between them, diving through the gaps in my cloak. I didn't want to come out just in front of the inn, where they might see me, so I ran along the alley until it spit me onto a street. Thin ice broke under my bare feet, cut my ankles. I was crying, but silently, tears freezing on my eyelashes and cheeks.

By the time I'd stumbled around and found myself in familiar surroundings, my teeth were chattering so hard that I couldn't have spoken had I been otherwise able to. By the time I reached Sky Eyes's door, I could barely walk. I crept up the steps, and fell against the door. My feet were numb, and my fingers, and my heart. I couldn't even knock, but lay there thinking that I should. The wind burrowed down the gaping neck of the cloak. Too cold. Too penetrating.

The door opened and I sprawled into warmth. Sky Eyes lifted me. "I'm sorry that you had to do what you did," she said, "but I'm not sorry you did it." She carried me to the fire, shutting out the cold with a push of one bare foot. She wore only a loosely tied robe; her grip on me shifted it from one shoulder and I could see the swell of one breast and its brown nipple. Her eyes were golden and rose and violet, a sunset giving over to dusk. I was too deadened by cold to be embarrassed.

"Who is it?" asked a young male voice. Over her shoulder, I saw one of the village boys, wrapped in a bedsheet. His shoulders were bare and sweaty and so was the rest of him, I knew, beneath the sheet. He glowered at me, impatient at the interruption.

She set me down on the hearth stone. "Her name is Jamillah." She was touching my feet now, although I could barely feel it. She frowned. "Her mother just died and her father has abandoned her. She's going to live with me and be my student."

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She pulled her gaping robe shut. "Put your clothes on," she told him. "I'm done with bed for the time being."

"But — " he said, and then did as he was told. It made me angry in a way that I didn't understand at all, that he would just stop in the middle of that curious dance adults did, with hardly an argument, merely because she said so. I think even then I realized how hard it would be to defy her myself.

She ignored him then, although I watched him through my half-frozen lashes, as he awkwardly struggled into his pants, dropping the sheet in the process. I had seen glimpses of my father in the mornings or evenings, getting into and out of the bed he shared with my mother before she sickened, but never a well-muscled young man, still hard with passion. It made me uneasy, but still I looked.

Sky Eyes took hot water from a kettle near the fire and mixed it with cold in a large, shallow bowl, then dripped something light green and fragrant into it. "Sit with your back to the wall here," she told me. I ended up with my feet and hands in the bowl, knees bent up to my chest and the bowl directly before me. The scent of the water and the pain of returning sensation in my hands and feet made me feel as if I were floating through a burning sea.

The boy came up behind Sky Eyes as she was dampening a cloth in the water. He ran his hands down her back. "Go," she said. "I've no time for you now."

"But we haven't finished — "

She gave him one steady look of her sunset eyes, which were almost entirely gone to violet now. He left without another word.

She sighed. "I do like to bed that boy," she said, "when it's convenient. Ah, well, he'll be back."

My pain was not enough to conceal my embarrassment and surprise. She turned the steady gaze on me. "I am not used to having children about," she said, "although the villagers would have that I am despoiling their male children. In my mind, there is nothing evil or dirty about sex, as long as all participants are willing and reasonably grown up. There is more harm done in half the marriage beds in this village than is imagined in mine. I will not pretend that I am a celibate priestess." She bathed my face with the cloth. "So if a lusty young man knocks at the door, let him

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in." Her mischievous grin faded into total seriousness. "If any of them — or any else — ever touch you against your will, you have my permission to kill them."

I burst into shaking tears at that statement, and Sky Eyes held me, oblivious to the water spilled on her robe. "You did what you had to — no, not what you had to; what you could. You did the hard thing, the best thing, and now her pain is over."

I cried harder, clinging to her with hands that burned with ice. I wanted to hear that it wasn't my fault, that my mother hadn't died at my hands. Sky Eyes drew back and held my shoulders. "You did it. Neither of us will pretend otherwise. If you do not accept that, I will bundle you up and carry you back to the innkeepers to be sold for debts. You choose."

My tears died within me, and the last of my childhood. I nodded. "I'm sorry it's so," she said, hugging me to her, "but with ability comes responsibility. I don't know yet if your mother would have thanked you or not, and your father certainly did not, but I think that you will someday believe you did the best thing." She wiped away my tears with the fragrant cloth, examined my hands and feet. "Well, you won't be running away for a day or two. Let's get you into my bed now — since I'm not using it at the moment." She winked one gray-violet eye and carried me to a big bed. The four posts had lengths of black silk tied to them. She deftly unknotted them.

I must have looked as curious as I felt. "Sometimes, if you wish it — or your partner does — " she began, placing the cloth in a covered basket. Her voice trailed off and a faint flush came to her cheeks. "Never mind for now."

Later that day, Sky Eyes pulled boxes of dusty bottles out of a small storage room. She hung mismatched cloth to disguise the tall shelves that covered three of the walls: yellow, with slender green lizards printed on it; solid purple; red and blue striped. Only one wall was left to show cool, gray stone with a wooden door in the center of it.

She had no other bed, so she formed a pallet of blankets and pillows on the floor. "Here," she said, carrying me in and setting me down. "Birdy has a nest now. And I have my bed back — just in case I should need it." There were hooks on the back of the door that had held dried herbs; the

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air in the tiny room still smelled of them. On the highest hook she hung the cloak which was the only thing inherited from my mother.

"I'll be going out now," she said, running one hand along the wool lining. "If any beautiful male creatures come by, tell them to wait a few minutes for me — or a number of years for yourself."

Then she was gone and I was alone. I had never had a room of my own before.

She was gone for some hours, during which I drowsed in and out of dream and thought, not always sure which was which. The vial, held by my winter-kissed hands, approached my mother's lips. I tried to stop, but the hands moved of their own will, tilting the vial, pouring — and then the face changed and it was Sky Eyes, her eyes as night black as the vial itself. "The best thing," her voice a mere breath, "is the hard thing. Is it so hard to forgive yourself?" And then my hands were holding the vial to my own lips and I was drinking a deep, endless drop. And crying.

I hadn't heard her return, but my cries brought her in to me. "I don't know what to do," she said, taking me into her arms. Her breath held the scent of wine; her eyes were deep summer blue with clouds floating across them. "Comfort is not a coin I am often called to give." She let me rest against her shoulder for a moment and then set me back in the pillows. "I can't take your pain away and wouldn't if I could. No comfort now, but someday you will be able to use it."

My sniffling subsided, not because of her less than tender words, but because I had worn out. Too much had happened in too little time. My eyes drifted shut. Sky Eyes touched my face. "I hate them," she said, her voice hard and vicious. "I hate them all."

The next day she slathered my hands and feet with gel and wrapped them with strips of cloth, wound round and round. "You are too big to carry far," she said, "but I don't think you can — or should — walk yet. Stand up for a moment." I did, biting my lip against the pain. She draped my mother's cloak around me, fastening the throat clasp, and put on her own. Then she crouched down, facing away from me. "Climb onto my back."

It wasn't easy, with my awkward, bundled limbs and two cloaks to

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deal with, but she finally staggered to a standing position. "It's a good thing you're only seven," she said. "At twelve you may well have to carry me." She had to let go of one of my legs to open the door, and I almost fell off.

She started laughing. "This will give them something to gossip about." She shut the door and grabbed me again, readjusting before she tottered off into the wind.

When we reached the low stone building, she pushed the door open without knocking. I had had no idea of our destination, but this place, cold by design, revealed its nature by the bodies stretched or twisted or curled up on the narrow benches that hung in tiers from the walls. A death house. A place where the corpses of those unfortunate enough to die in winter were kept until the ground thawed. I wanted to run on my bandaged feet, but Sky Eyes carried me to the low bench where my mother lay. She let go. I tried to cling to her, but my bandaged hands gave out and I slipped to the floor beside my dead mother.

A thin layer of frost covered her skin and clothes and hair, sealed her to the bench. "Look at her expression," Sky Eyes said softly.

I made myself look. Under the frost, her mouth was slack, her teeth barely showing. Not drawn into that grimace of pain. Her hands were still arranged across her chest; my father's work, no doubt. He had comforted the dead and left me huddled on the floor. A sudden rage flared within me. He had known she was dying, had known that the pain easer was a life drainer, had known that I would end up killing her. He had known and let me do it and then blamed me for it.

A rough howl escaped me. I ran my hands over my mother's face, her hands, her frost-coated hair. Tears melted trails in her white frost shroud. "No," I said, my voice thick and awkward. "I didn't mean to."

"You did," said Sky Eyes, looking at me through pink-tinted dusk. "You made a choice, a decision, and carried it out. You acted — though it was perhaps the hardest thing you will ever do in your life. Poor child, that you were called upon to do the hardest thing so young."

I hated her, for not letting me lie even to myself, or to the dead. At the same time, her words had a curiously lightening effect. How hard could life be, if I had already done the hardest thing? I had yet to learn that the many smaller hard things, common as dust, were more wearing than the

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one hardest. Fortunately, she didn't tell me, but let me discover it myself, in the years to follow.

"I'm sorry," I said, laying my face on my mother's cold cheek. This time Sky Eyes did not contradict me.

WHEN I HAD cried myself out and we were both shivering violently, it was time to leave the death house. I had to crawl up on the edge of my mother's bench to get on Sky Eyes's back, so stiff and clumsy were we both. I found my gaze drawn to the other bodies: several old ones who had found this last winter of their lives too harsh; a young woman with her dead child clasped upon her chest, both pulled into death by the birth; a large bearded man with terribly whitened hands and an odd, peaceful expression.

Sky Eyes nodded toward him. "They say that freezing to death makes one warm and sleepy, that there is no pain. I can feel that in him. Can you?"

Even as she asked me, she was showing me how to do so. Almost against my will, my mind threaded itself into his death. Yes; it was a comfortable death, as was the death of the old woman on the bench beneath him. I jerked away from the wrenching denial of the young woman who held her child only after her life had bled out of her. Sky Eyes stopped. She turned her head and looked back over her shoulder at me. "Do you want to feel her death?"

I held very still, afraid that the shivering within me would be interpreted as assent or denial. Would it be a terrible thing to know? Would I regret it? Yet I could not refuse. I nodded and let my mind touch the last minutes of my mother's life.

Release from pain. Regret that there would be no more minutes of life, but acceptance that it had to be that way to escape the consuming pain. Shock and sorrow at the knowledge in my eyes. Then nothing. Life flowing from her in a thin stream, until there was no more left in her.

I didn't notice that Sky Eyes had even started walking until we were out of the death house and down the street. Tears froze on my cheeks. "You'd be better off not crying now," she said. "Or your face will freeze and the frozen-hearted bitches of the village will be imagining that I am torturing you."

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I stopped crying and let my head rest on her left shoulder. Perhaps it was torture, but it was the torture of sudden, rapid growth. I fell asleep and didn't wake until she let me slide to the step outside her door.

"You are heavy," she said, opening the door with hands that shook. "Perhaps it is different when a woman has raised a baby from the first; the strength in her back and arms would grow along with the child. I must be an imbecile to begin this way."

Her words would have stung had she not, even as she was speaking, led me gently in and settled me on the hearth. She knelt beside me and stirred the embers with a stick which burst into flame. She built the fire up to a rage and leaned on one arm, looking at me with those summer blue eyes. "What a first lesson: how to speak with the dead. There's no doubt; I'm an imbecile." She affected the childish expression of one who had but a small portion of wit.

My mouth twitched into a smile and she dropped the pretense. "Ah, you must have been starved for humor if my poor performance is enough for you. I suppose I will have to do, flaws and all. Shall we have soup for supper? Or breakfast, I guess it would be."

I had never had soup for breakfast before, but then I had never listened to the dead before breakfast either. Of the two, I preferred the soup.

It was not the last time I ate soup for breakfast, not the last time I listened to the dead. Sky Eyes didn't put her attention to knowing the proper foods to eat at the proper times. Or perhaps she did know and just refused to obey the rules that the rest of the women followed: gruel or night-soaked grain in the morning; a hearty midday meal of freshly baked bread, meat, whatever fruits or vegetables could be found; soup and leftover bread, maybe a sweet, in the evening. We were just as likely to start baking bread near sundown and eat it outdoors when the rest of the village was abed, butter dripping from our fingers as we pointed out stars to one another. Sometimes, stars in her eyes echoed those overhead.

Most frequently, we had no formal meals, with each of us foraging through the supplies whenever hunger bit. I ate a ten-day's worth of sweeting once, but Sky Eyes said nothing. She didn't have to; my stomach spoke more firmly than any reprimand. More than that, though, there was an odd restraining factor to such freedom. The mere thought that I could

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eat anything I wanted whenever I wanted meant that in our pantry there was little of the luster that the forbidden holds.

The luster glimmered on the knowledge she withheld for vague future times when I was "older." That curse of children — to be forever too young for whatever is currently tempting. It did not occur to me that the opportunities she did give me — listening to the dead at seven; being told openly about sex as a fine, natural thing long before my woman hair began to grow; eating or sleeping as my body required it, not to the schedule of some adult — were far beyond the rights of the other village children.

They despised me.

Sky Eyes never suggested I go out to play with them, but neither did she discourage me the first time I thought to. It was spring of the first year with her, my hands and feet fully healed from the winter kiss. A group of children were floating chips of wood along the wagon tracks that had filled with water the night before, splashing barefoot in the mud. Their parents were so relieved to have them out of the house after a long winter underfoot that the washing up task ahead was being completely ignored. Even the cleanest were spattered and freckled with mud. I looked from the window to the table where Sky Eyes was sorting herbs. "Go if you wish," she said. There was more she wanted to say, but she only tightened her lips and let me discover some things for myself.

The taste of mud. The feel of a bony foot on the back of my neck, pressing my face into a deep rut until I couldn't hold my breath any longer. The deliberate release, after I had been choking for several seconds, that would not allow me to believe it had been any sort of accident. The sudden quietness of children who are no longer playing but have moved into the work of being cruel.

For some, cruelty was no difficult task. The tall girl who tripped me as I went past her to see the boats and the boy with the scarred cheek whose foot held me down were the worst. I was more angry, though, at those who were clearly uneasy, the ones who formed the words and thoughts in their minds — we shouldn't be; let her go; don't — and yet said nothing.

When I struggled up to my knees, sputtering and coughing, the front of my dress completely blackened, they were all standing around me in a ragged circle.

"She's a dummy," said the tall girl. "She's not even crying."

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I touched my face. Amazingly, she was right.

"She probably can't," said someone else. I didn't see who.

"I saw her crying." This was a boy with black curls almost hiding his eyes. He spoke in a whisper. "I was looking out the window. She was riding on the witch's back in the cold and crying."

"Really, Ketrin?"

He nodded, his beautiful hair dipping down.

"Witches don't cry," said someone behind me. "Maybe she's not a witch."

"That's stupid," said another. "My father says there are no witches, just healers."

"She's not crying now, is she?" asked the tall girl, ignoring the comment about healers. She stepped closer. "She's a witch now. The innkeeper says she killed her mother. I heard her tell my mother."

They drew back a fraction, but apparently fear was not enough to overcome curiosity. Or cruelty.

I didn't move. This was not a time to be angry, not a time to leap up and claw at her with my muddy fingers. She was too big and the others were on her side — or at least not on mine. My whole body and mind were tense and alert. I made my face smooth and calm and just looked at her.

She didn't expect that. I sensed her confusion; a second later she stopped. "She's not worth it. Little dumb witch brat. Let's go slide on the hill." She turned and ran off, making sure her first step sprayed dirty water on me.

The others followed her. About half of them splashed me. Most of the rest avoided my eyes. Only Ketrin hesitated, giving me an apologetic smile before he left.

I hated him most.

I knelt in the mud for a long time, until the mud drying on my face made me feel as if my skin would crack and fall off if my expression changed. It wasn't until a cart came sploshing toward me, the driver yelling obscenities, that I moved.

Sky Eyes said nothing when I came in. She pulled the mud-caked dress off over my head and helped me into the big tub, already filled with gently

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steaming water. She dipped up handfuls of water and poured them over my face and hair.

As the mud loosened, so did something within me, and I began to sob. Then her whispers were pouring over me as well, "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry." Tears poured from her cloud gray eyes until her face was as wet as mine. Witches did cry — if that was what she was — just not in front of people like the tall girl and the boy with the scar. People like Ketrin.

I never did go to the village school. Sky Eyes didn't laugh at the school teacher when he came by to inform us that I should be educated. At the time, I was measuring out — to the drop — the various ingredients that made up a sleeping draught. The directions were written in Sky Eyes's neat hand: one part this to three parts that, and so on. She had told me to read through the recipe, see that I had all of the components to hand, and make as much as possible, with the limiting factor being whatever there was the least of. I was nine.

"Could any of your students do this?" Sky Eyes asked.

"Certainly," said the teacher, after a hesitation. He was a youngish man, very tall, who had lived in the village for only a few years. To my knowledge, he had never before been to our house, but I thought by the way Sky Eyes had greeted him, how she had held his hand for just a moment longer than necessary when he'd offered it, that he would be back.

"Without supervision at each step?" Sky Eyes took a sip of tea and looked at the man over the rim of her cup. "And would you then drink the sleeping draught, keeping in mind that it contains bone leaf, which — in larger proportion — makes one sleep to the point of death?"

I continued my task, measuring and mixing, but my hands were suddenly cold. Bone leaf. Sleep to the point of death. I knew how to make the potion in the black vial now, as well as administer it.

The teacher gave her a rueful grin, as if to concede the point. "She does well at her reading and figuring," he said, "but there are other things one learns at school — "

Sky Eyes set her cup down and her eyes went stormy. "Things like which hurts most, the nose bleed after a slap or the soul ache after some vicious name-calling? Would you really have her learn that?"

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The teacher dropped his face into his hands. "No, no, you're right. I would try to protect her but it would not be enough. She would be hurt and I would be guilty." He looked up at me. "You have a fine mind; I can see that. I would have liked having you in my school but chances are you would not have liked it. Is your potion done yet?"

I had just begun funneling the liquid into a rack of clean, gray vials, with the rune for sleep scratched on the front of each one. I nodded, and he handed me a coin. "For when I have problems sleeping."

I stoppered a vial and gave it to him, pleased by this evidence of faith.

He stood, and Sky Eyes did as well. "You must come back," she said. "If you are having problems sleeping." The look she gave him, her eyes half-lidded storms, accented her meaning.

Even at age nine, I could sense his mixture of apprehension and desire. Desire won. He held out his hand again, although that was less common than doing so on greeting. Sky Eyes extended her own and their fingers met in something that was more than half caress. Yes, he would be here soon, making sounds that filtered through the stone walls of my room.

THE SCHOOL MASTER did come by, always late at night, when he supposed I would not know. He didn't know just how fine my mind was, that it could pick up his thoughts and emotions as well as precisely measure out the most complicated potion. I sometimes saw him on the street when I was out on errands for Sky Eyes; he spoke kindly to me.

Sky Eyes was right, though. He couldn't have protected me from the other children. They tormented me at every opportunity, flinging stones, animal droppings, names. My legs grew long and I discovered that this gave me a speed which few of them could match. For a while, the girl who had tripped me the first time could catch me, but it wasn't long before she turned her attention from childhood cruelty to flirting with the older boys.

Ketrin never became my defender, but he at least never participated in the viciousness. If he was alone when he saw me, he would greet me. I stopped hating him. Other than Sky Eyes and some of her men, he was the closest I had to a friend — I couldn't afford to hate him.

* * *

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At nine, my fascination with sex was tinged with disgust. The disgust did not last.

The fascination did.

I kept the hinges on my bedroom door well-greased, and sometimes slipped out to look at Sky Eyes and whoever happened to be sharing her bed at the time. They were mostly — but not all — young. Occasionally, one of the older widowers or unmarried bachelors came to the door, ostensibly for some potion or other.

She told me this after the widower who ran the mill had been by. I watched them from the space between the table and some crates. Through the slats in the crate, I could see them stroking each other and plunging and shuddering. "No," she said, softly, with a catch in her voice. "Oh, no." But it did not sound like a command to stop. His silver hair fell over her face like rain at dusk. He slid his hips from side to side, over her, slowly, slowly. Her fingers clutched the sheet and she arched her back, and then they were moving together, explosively.

My own fingers moved between my legs. I didn't know why it felt good, only that it did. Maybe I gasped. Maybe she had always known that I was watching and where I watched from.

At any rate, after he had gone, with one lingering touch and an even longer kiss, she called me out from my hiding place.

I was eleven. I had been there for four years, long enough to know that she would not hit me, no matter what I did. Still, my stomach quivered as I stood up.

She wore the same silk robe as she had the day I came to her door half-frozen. "Are you satisfied?" she asked. "Did you see what you needed to see?"

Whatever I had expected, it wasn't this. Her cheeks flushed faintly. "It must seem strange to you, but it isn't. You'll discover it soon, whenever you are ready."

My hands came up to my chest and touched the tiny breasts there. It didn't seem possible that I would ever have a woman's figure, even though I already had the beginnings of a woman's desire. One thing I did have to know, though. I made myself speak, my voice hoarse with disuse. "Touch yourself?" Heat rushed to my face.

Sky Eyes laughed. "Oh yes. When there is no one in my bed — or there

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is, and he's inept and clumsy. Not everyone you bed will know how to please you, so you'd better know how to please yourself. Here, I have a gift for you." She darted back to her bed and took something out of a wooden chest. A long, curled feather, orange and yellow, streaked with blue. "The tailfeather of a shennikan," she said, handing it to me. "I like to stroke myself with one, my arms and legs and breasts. And especially my throat."

My fingers curled around the slender shaft of the feather. I must have looked surprised, because she laughed again. "Of course I touch my sex parts — but that doesn't mean I ignore the rest of my body. Or my mind. Sometimes I can bring myself pleasure just thinking of hot, young bodies and lengths of silk — " She turned bright pink. "I never imagined a conversation like this, though." She swatted my behind. "Take your feather and your fantasies and go to bed now."

Another question, though. I hesitated. "Old ones?"

"Ah, sometimes they're the best. The young have the energy — but the old have knowledge. They know how to touch and move to please a woman. At least the ones I invite into my bed." She looked at me seriously. "Be careful who you invite into yours, when you are ready to do so. Search them for sickness, in body or mind. And I will not take a man who has a wife."

She slapped her forehead. "What am I saying — telling one who hasn't had her blood yet not to bed married men. You poor child, to have me for...." Her voice trailed off, but we both knew her thought. *For a mother.*

I had never called her mother, which wasn't unusual, as I rarely spoke. More importantly, though, I had not allowed myself to think of her as a mother. I wasn't sure she would welcome that. Now that I knew she would, I wasn't sure that I could. It pleased me though, to have the option.

"Thank you," I whispered.

"You're welcome." As I was closing my door, she said, "Just be discreet."

Was she giving me permission to watch? I didn't know and I didn't ask. There was too much going on in my head, not to mention my body.

Men were not the only visitors, though. The same women that despised Sky Eyes, that gossiped about her and futilely forbade their sons

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to come near her, they came for abortifacients, joint easers, the silvery drink that brought one out of a dark mood, a dozen other things.

A few came secretly for Seeings and Knowings, sneaking through the alleys and tapping the back door with shaking fingers. If we sensed the visit soon enough, one of us would race to the door and open it just as she raised her hand. Mean perhaps, but it enhanced belief. For some reason, those who sought Seeing or Knowing were always women. Did the men not know? Not believe? We talked about it whenever a woman left, the knowledge of the vision uneasy in her mind. Sky Eyes was of the opinion that men thought they knew and saw everything already. I thought perhaps they didn't know we could do such things.

Seeing and Knowing...the women didn't really understand either. They came with simple, specific questions: *Will I have a child? Yes or no.* Once though, when the answer was yes, we both got the dreadful image of a daughter with brain enough to breathe and no more. That time, Sky Eyes shook her head sadly. "No child this time. I'm sorry. Let me give you a tincture to help you deal with this pain." The brew also contained a ridding potion. There was no half-dead baby born to that young woman.

When will my husband return from the high lakes? Never, alas. But we didn't tell her that he had taken up with a mountain woman, that they laughed when they thought of her, waiting back in the foothills. Instead we let her keep the warmer image of his body floating in the clear, cold water of the lakes, fallen in returning to her.

Seeing and Knowing. But not telling all. Perhaps it was good that the men did not come, and the women infrequently. Seeing and Knowing was not precise and simple and clearcut, as was the brewing of potions.

We were kept busy gathering the ingredients in the fields and forests, along streambanks, past the tree line of the nearby mountains. Or trading for the more exotic substances that the traveling peddlers brought through.

There was one, a small man with a head as bald as a stone and skin as black as shadows who always spent an extra day or two in the village, much of it in Sky Eyes's bed, with scent sticks burning in a smoky circle. She smiled whenever she saw him leading his long-necked pack beast, its mane fluttering with bright ribbons. After he left, she always cried.

His name was Ta, unusual in this area, and he spoke with a strange lilt to his voice, peppering his speech with words from another language.

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I couldn't always figure out the meaning from context, but I didn't care. He called me Jami-bird and measured himself against me, back to back, on every visit. At eleven, my head was already even with his, although he teased me that it was my hair that made me seem so tall. He was fascinating, and in my fantasies I most frequently imagined that Ta would be my first lover, small and dark, singing to me in his rich voice as he sang to Sky Eyes.

Eventually he was my lover, but not my first.

I WAS FIFTEEN, or nearly that anyway. Sky Eyes had gone climbing for bone leaf, which was found only above the tree line, in the shadows of boulders where pockets of soil had collected. It was used in many of our potions, from the sleeping potions and pain-killers to the abortifacients and life-drainers. Normally we went together, but my adolescence was testing us both, and she had stalked off at daylight with an extra collecting bag, enough food for two days, and a blanket. "Don't expect me until tomorrow," she'd snapped.

I had stared at her sullenly, thinking fierce, uncaring thoughts, watching her struggle to open the door with too full hands. Not offering to help.

She didn't say it — I'll give her that — but her mind did play with the thought: *why did I take her in*? Part of me wanted to fly back to that winter day and tug myself in the wrong direction, whisper words of discouragement, let the girl who would become me freeze in the snow.

Maybe if I had been close with some of the others who were clumsily groping between being children and adults, adept at neither, I would have realized that such conflict was normal. Part of growing up. What had to happen on the way.

But I did not, and neither did Sky Eyes, who had grown up without her own mother and was as isolated from the rest of the village as I was. I sat on the bench, smoldering with anger and resentment, a tall girl with slender limbs, ordinary brown eyes.

When the knocker sounded, I almost didn't answer. My mind was so busy turning over my misfortunes that I had no idea who had come. Probably another woman who needed soul or belly cramps eased. Or one

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of the village elders, aching for some joint salve. But I knew better than to let my tiff with Sky Eyes interfere with business, so I dragged myself to the door and arranged my face in a neutral expression — if not welcoming, then at least not actively hostile.

It was one of the young men; I didn't know his name. He drew back when he saw me, surprise almost palpable. And desire. For him, right then, no one existed other than Sky Eyes.

"Is she here?" he asked. "I need a — a potion."

I just looked at him, his desire igniting the same within me. He was taller than I, but just by a little, with light hair and skin. The neck of a vial glinted between his fingers. I could almost feel his hand on my breast. I opened the door further and he came in, looking around for Sky Eyes, not seeing me.

All I wanted to do was make him see me. Make him want me. I touched my hair, felt smooth silkiness rather than tangles. Yes, I had combed it this morning: deep brown, almost black, with more than a touch of wild curl. Would he see that hair while looking for Sky Eyes's silvery gold? Would he want to stroke my brown skin?

I closed the door behind him and he looked at me. "Where is she?" And then he looked again, seeing me, remembering things he had heard. "Ah, you're the girl who doesn't talk."

I wanted to talk. I opened my lips and took a breath, but no words would come out.

"Is Sky Eyes here?" he asked again, watching for the reply this time.

I reluctantly shook my head.

"Oh," he said.

His disappointment cut through the stillness that inhabited my throat. "Wait," I whispered. With a boldness that astounded me I reached out and took the vial from his hand. Plain clay brown, but the rune scratched on the front of it — the symbols for male and female intertwined — meant that it had once held aphrodisiac.

I felt my cheeks heat up. The aphrodisiac was in the storeroom where I slept, behind the lizard-printed cloth. My hands grew sweaty and I almost dropped the vial. Could I do this? I gestured for him to follow me.

In the small room, I could feel his breath on my shoulder as I lifted the

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cloth aside and reached for the bottle of aphrodisiac. I took off the stopper with a practiced curl of my little finger that allowed me to use both hands and not set the glass stopper down.

Inside, I was shaking like pinch leaves in a breeze, but my hands were steady. Aphrodisiac was a thin, sweet potion, easy to pour. I filled the vial and handed it to him, uncorked. Then, while he was still watching me, I tilted my head back and poured some from the bottle into my mouth.

His breath caught. He was seeing me, seeing the jumbled pillow bed on the floor, the open vial in his own hand. I set the bottle back on the shelf, replaced the stopper, let the cloth fall back into place.

Desire burned in me, fanned into flame by the aphrodisiac. I wanted to touch him, touch myself, be touched. "Should I drink it?" he asked, his voice low.

My eyes said yes. He heard.

I felt light and heavy at the same time, unsure if I was about to fall down or float to the ceiling. I dropped to my knees on the bed, my skirt pooling around me. He followed.

Sky Eyes had told me there might be pain the first time, and there was, but not much. The touching. His mouth on mine. The passion running inside me.

When we were spent, he pulled his trousers on and covered me with a blanket the color of autumn leaves. "That was fine," he said, his voice lingering on the last word. "I must be going now." He shyly held the vial out for a refill on the aphrodisiac. I wrapped the blanket around myself and stood up, suddenly awkward with my bare shoulders and wild hair. Pouring was more difficult with my elbows clamped tight to my sides to hold the blanket in place, but I managed. "Well," he said, "I must be going." He handed me two coins, for the two fillings of the vial, and then he was gone.

I danced around, tripped on the trailing edge of the blanket and fell on my jumbled bed. I laughed and cried and touched myself to see if I felt different. Yes, there was a difference. I wasn't a girl anymore.

It was late the next morning when Sky Eyes returned, pale bone leaf protruding from her collecting bags, grassy blanket slung over her shoulder, shoes scuffed and dusty. Her expression was wary when she

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entered, but it changed almost immediately. "Who was it?" she asked softly.

I didn't know his name, I realized, but she caught his image from my mind and nodded. "Rashi. A good lover. Not terribly imaginative, but...."

I couldn't look at her any more, embarrassed almost to tears by the thought that she knew what it was like to bed him, how he liked to run his fingers down a woman's sides, letting the touch trail off at the hips.

Her tight voice made me look up. "This is going to be more difficult than I ever imagined." Her face was pale, with red spots on her cheeks. "I don't think I can talk now." She dropped the bags of bone leaf on the stone floor and walked to her bedroom, her back very straight.

She was jealous, I realized with a shock that dried incipient tears. She couldn't deal with a young woman who was actually going to act on the theories of sexuality she had spouted so glibly to a child.

I picked up the discarded bone leaf and rinsed it in a bowl of clean water, being careful to handle it by the dry stems and not immerse my hands. It was more poisonous when swallowed, but it could cause a certain deadness in the fingers, and an air of confusion. Sky Eyes was jealous. The thought seemed ludicrous. I clipped the bone leaf to a drying string.

My thighs felt sore from the previous morning's activities, which gave me a rather perverse pleasure. I carefully lifted the bowl of tainted water and carried it to the back. We had a special place where we poured such things, on a deep bed of gravel which we covered with a board to keep birds and animals — including the human kind — from being affected, inadvertently or otherwise. Sometimes, children would sneak into the fenced yard and snatch pebbles, which they dared each other to suck on. The board deterred them little, but Sky Eyes insisted.

I had just replaced the board when I heard the door open behind me. I looked and saw Sky Eyes holding a mug. "Thank you for hanging the bone leaf," she said. "You should drink this now."

I took the mug and sniffed.

"To ensure that you will not have a child."

The liquid was sweet, but with a metallic aftertaste. I shuddered and finished quickly.

Sky Eyes picked the blossom from a bird flower. Yellow pollen clung

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to her fingers. We used the pollen in a grainy potion for head pain, the pink-tipped petals in a mixture for burning that produced a calming aroma. "I'm sorry," she said. "I didn't know I would feel this way — and I don't know what I'm going to do about it. I'm not used to not knowing." She gave a short, rueful laugh. "Maybe I could brew myself a potion. Or one for you, to turn you back into a child, and keep you one."

I tried to find a smile, failed.

She looked at me again, her eyes tinted the yellow of sunrise turning to day. "No, you're not a child and will never be again. So I will deal with you as a woman. If a man comes for me, he comes for me. Not you. If a man comes for you, I will not interfere. Understand?"

I understood, and was sullen all over again. All the men and boys who came for Sky Eyes were not to be touched or teased or invited to my bed. Who would come for me, anyway?

Ketrin.

My almost friend. His body had lengthened and strengthened, but the black curls had not changed. And neither had the smiles he gave me: apologetic smiles that I rarely returned. I got the feeling that he still saw me as a skinny, mud-blackened seven-year-old who would not cry, no matter how much she wanted to.

Two days after Sky Eyes returned, he came.

I opened the door, as Sky Eyes was in back, checking the darkberry stems we had set out to sun dry. Ketrin stood there, his smile more tentative than usual. "Ah, hello," he said, beginning to extend his hand, faltering, dropping it to his side. "I've come for a — potion." His face reddened, and he let his hair fall, covering his eyes. "You might be too busy."

I truly didn't know what I was going to do until one hand opened the door and the other gestured him in. What did he mean by a "potion." Aphrodisiac? He didn't have a vial with him, and he had never been one of Sky Eyes's lovers. Had he talked to Rashi? Without intending to, I found in his mind that he had. Perhaps the boys and men were ignorant of Seeing and Knowing, but they knew — or soon would — that the mute girl who lived with Sky Eyes shared her fondness for sex. Rashi hadn't known my name either.

The air thickened around me. I wanted to die. I wanted to go back

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three days and shut the door in Rashi's face — or, at the very least, choke on the aphrodisiac as I poured it into my mouth. I turned away from Ketrin, again unwilling to show him tears.

"Jamillah?" He touched my shoulder. Lightly. Briefly. Not as a lover would. "Are you all right? Should I go now?"

If I moved, I was afraid the tears would escape. At the back door, I sensed Sky Eyes, her arms full of darkberry stems. Her mind touched mine, took in the situation. She didn't come in.

"Jamillah? I didn't really need a potion." He didn't want me to turn around any more than I wanted to. "I just wanted to talk to you. Perhaps we could go walking sometime."

Still I didn't move. "Ah, then," he said. "Goodbye."

He opened the door. Before he could go out, before he could close it, I said, "Yes."

He hesitated. "Tomorrow, then." Since I wasn't looking at him, I couldn't be sure, but it sounded as if he were smiling.

Sky Eyes came in the back after he closed the door. She dumped the stems on the table. A few wrinkled fruits fell off. "I was afraid your lover wouldn't leave before I was as wrinkled as these."

"Not my lover," I hissed. Anger dried any thought of tears.

"He will be," she said. She spread a cloth on one end of the table and picked up a single stem, tapping its base firmly on the table so the dried darkberries would fall on the cloth. She tossed the stalks aside; we used them to help start the fire. "He has beautiful hair."

My fingernails cut into my palms and she laughed. "I won't touch your precious Ketrin, unless he touches me first."

Something froze within me. I wanted to scream that he would never touch her, but my mind showed otherwise. A Knowing. His arms around her. His black curls tangled with her pale hair. His face reflected in winter-gray eyes.

Her laughter died. "I'm sorry," she said, her voice soft as petals.

The next morning, I wove a green ribbon into my hair and tied a yellow scarf around my waist. *I will not let you take him,* my mind said to Sky Eyes, when Ketrin smiled to see me. She just glared at me and turned away, thinking, *as if I would.*

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We went into the summer morning with a waterskin and a pouch of nuts and more dried diolla fruit than I should have taken — unlike darkberries, it was rare, hard to pick from steep mountain cuts, and it dried into practically nothing. Sky Eyes knew I had it, but she said nothing.

It felt as if everyone watched us as we cut through the village, heading for the tallest hill this side of the mountains, almost a mountain in its own right. We hadn't discussed where we were going, but it wasn't hard to pick the destination out of Ketrin's thoughts — a small cave with a curtain of vine over the mouth. He thought it was his alone, a secret place, but Sky Eyes and I had been up there many times. If we were going very high in the mountains gathering, we sometimes slept in the cave to get us just that much closer. Or, late on a return trip, laden with full collecting bags, we stayed if we were too tired to make the final descent to the village.

Ketrin was having a hard time deciding what to say, and I certainly did not help him. The steepness of the slope was a good excuse, and we did little but cast shy glances at each other as we climbed.

I don't know what would have happened had we drunk from the waterskin on the steep part, but our hands were too busy grasping rocks and sturdy rooted grasses to help in the ascent. It wasn't until we reached the cave and collapsed side by side that Ketrin unslung the waterskin from his back and took a long pull before passing it to me.

The expression on his face might have warned me, but I was so thirsty that I could think of nothing but drinking, how good it tasted, how —

He reached for me as the first giddy waves of desire hit me. "Jamillah," he said, as he laid me back into the cave, stroking my face, my throat, my breasts. My own hands were busy, running over his chest and down over his hips and the curve of his buttocks, pressing him against me.

We didn't even undress. I unlaced the front of his trousers with frantic fingers and he lifted my skirt. "You are so beautiful," he murmured into my hair, his breath warm in the hollow beneath my ear. "So beautiful." His hands lower now. I moved under him, and then we were moving together.

It was better than the time with Rashi, for there was no pain, and I knew what to expect. Too, there was something about Ketrin that had captivated me for these eight years, ever since I had seen him in that ring of silent children. And he had never shared Sky Eyes's bed.

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When we had satisfied ourselves, we lay together, my head on his chest, my face hidden in my own hair. The questions I read in his mind were echoed in my own: what had happened? I had put plain, fresh water in the skin and — and then I had gone to fix the ribbon in my hair. Sky Eyes must have poured out some of the water and replaced it with aphrodisiac. It didn't take much, especially when attraction existed already.

But he thought I had done it. "Sky Eyes," I whispered. "Not me." I tried to straighten my skirt, as it was bunched about my waist. It wasn't a long skirt, anyway, but the shorter skirt to be worn with cloth or leather leggings, so useful when climbing or riding. Some women wore them always, but I had always enjoyed the feel of soft cloth swishing against my bare legs.

Ketrin helped me straighten my skirt, and then rolled away from me to lace his trousers. We were both self-conscious and embarrassed by the sudden, wild passion we had exhibited. Not all of it could be explained by the aphrodisiac, diluted as it was.

I sat up and pushed my hair back, carefully not looking at him. The discarded waterskin lay on the ground near me, by some quirk tossed aside in such a fashion that the mouth of it leaned up against a rock. Only a little had spilled.

We had drink, if we were willing to drink it.

Turning just a little, I saw Ketrin also looking at the hide container, also coming to the same conclusions. He blushed and dipped his head. "Sit closer," he said, patting the ground next to him. I scooted over and leaned against him, feeling suddenly trembly. "I'm thirsty," he said deliberately, reaching past me for the waterskin, his arm brushing my breast. "Are you?"

After a hot, anxious second, I nodded. The grin he gave me was not apologetic this time. "Thank you, Sky Eyes," he said, holding the bag out as if in salute. "We might as well drink it all this time."

I opened my mouth and he gave me a long drink, took one himself. Back and forth, until the bag was empty and we were reeling with passion.

This time we took our clothes off, explored every inch of sensitive skin. There was no more embarrassment, no more hesitation, only my brown body against his pale one.

* * *

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After two more times when we seemed to be trying to get inside each other's skin, we dressed. There was no more aphrodisiac, no more water. We fed each other the nuts and the tiny amber globes of dried diolla fruit.

"We had better go," Ketrin said, glancing at the sun through the sparse curtain of vine. I nodded and stood, running my hands over my hair.

"It's no use," said Ketrin. "You are well and truly mussed. Wild. And lovely." He kissed my forehead. "Come on then."

We were just as silent on the way down.

I didn't let Ketrin come in with me, just pushed him gently into the lengthening shadows. I was starving and my throat was very dry. I didn't know whether to thank Sky Eyes or scream at her.

In the end, I did neither. Sky Eyes was in her bed with someone; I wasn't sure who. I filled a clean skin with water and took it to my room, with a whole roast bird that she had left for me by the trickling stream in the cold box.

My fingers were greasy and my stomach full when I crept out later to wash and pee. Sky Eyes was in bed still, alone now, not asleep.

"Goodnight," she called softly. "I hope you enjoyed it."

As usual, I said nothing.

IF ONLY I could say that Ketrin and I were as happy as we had been that afternoon. If only the image of the two of them entwined hadn't burned in my head — it hadn't happened, but it would, and that poisoned me. Even when we were together in my bed, I was angry. At Sky Eyes; at Ketrin; at myself, for somehow letting it happen. I didn't tell him what was to happen, but every time he smiled at Sky Eyes, every time he spoke politely to her, I scowled. I stopped talking entirely, which made being with him more difficult.

"Should we stay here today?" he asked me quietly, standing on the step. I shook my head.

He sighed. Insects, stickery plants, rocky ground — all those deterrents to bedding outside flew through his mind. "All right then, let's go."

The image again, the two of them together, flew through mine. Ketrin lying back on Sky Eyes's sheet as she bent over him. No, I didn't want to go out into the dust, either. I shook my head again.

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Ketrin stepped back. "You don't want to stay; you don't want to go. I think you don't even want to be with me. Fine, then. You don't have to."

He turned and left, taking the steps in one angry movement. I was alone. I was alone. I was alone. The image. Over and over.

I couldn't leave or he would think I was following him. I couldn't go in to face Sky Eyes. I walked down the steps and around the house to the back, where I picked the heads from tall feather grass with vicious snaps of my fingers.

Sky Eyes came out a few minutes later. "Ketrin wants to see you. I'll send him out." She looked at the ground, littered with the decapitated feather grass. "When he's gone, sort through those and preserve the ripe ones. Why couldn't you have waited a week? Over half of those are wasted now."

Ketrin wasn't smiling when he came through the door. "I'm sorry," he said, as soon as Sky Eyes left us alone. "I just don't know what to do sometimes."

And you think I do? I wanted to say. *You think I understand myself — let alone you*? *I just want to love you and have you love me and be able to forget about this picture in my head. I want to be just an ordinary girl.* But I had never spoken so fluently in my life, and I couldn't start now. I bent down and picked up a few ripe heads, rusty gold, lighter hull tips waving in the breeze.

"Say something," he said. "I know you can."

Everything I had ever wanted to say gathered at the back of my throat, a choking ball of unspoken words. The feather grass heads were light in my hands, tickling my palms. I picked up another. Tears dripped, but my back was to Ketrin, so he didn't see.

"I don't think this is going to work," he said. Sorrow, anger, frustration — his voice was tight with all of them. *If you'd just talk to me* beat in his mind.

I sorted through the heads lying on the ground. To preserve them, one washed them thoroughly and packed them in clear, glass jars, then poured oil over them. After a year, they would be softened enough to eat, a delicacy. A pity I had broken them early — next year we would run short.

The door closed behind Ketrin and he was gone. Sky Eyes left a few minutes later; I heard her go, received her brief message in my mind, *Gathering. I'll be back tomorrow.* There was nothing we needed desper-

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ately, but I was too upset to be more than dully grateful that she was giving me the time and space to grieve.

Ta came in the night, found me sitting by the fire with salt tracks dried on my face. "Not the tears of a child," he said, his voice rich, the firelight glinting off his smooth, perfect head. "You have gone and grown up on Ta; haven't you, Jami-bird." He ran dark thumbs down my cheeks, brought his hands up to his mouth and tasted. "Not child tears at all." He did it again, a slow, deliberate stroke, and his moistened thumbs loosened the tautness of dry tears. I turned my face until one thumb brushed my lips. We both shivered.

"Ta can help," he said. "My brown one. My Jami-bird." He kissed my mouth and my chin and my cheeks and my eyes. After a time, I was kissing him back. He tasted of strange spices.

"You are not so sad now," he said, pulling away. "Ta will let you sleep."

"No." I caught hold of one of the loops of ribbon that decorated his vest. My voice was hoarse. "Sing."

"Ta sings in only one place," he said.

I nodded, feeling shy. "Sing."

He looked at me for a long time, his eyelids hooding his eyes. "Come, then, little brown bird, my Jami-bird." He led me to Sky Eyes's bed, already humming under his breath, a deep droning that eased my hesitation about using her bed.

"Lie down, Jami-bird, Wanissa shay." He went back to his pack, took a handful of scent sticks from a hollow tube, and thrust the thick ends into the fire. Curls of scented smoke began to rise and drift.

I was still standing by the bed. "Lie down, my slender one, my pretty one, my brown skin." The words were a song to me. I let myself follow them as he placed the scent sticks in pitted lumps of clay that had been used for just this purpose. Windflower and siella and something that smelled of burning sandal oil, other scents too exotic for me to identify. His voice rose with the smoke, in words or in sounds that touched the ear without meaning.

He knelt beside me on the bed. His hands were smaller than my own, and deft, but he did not hurry. He withdrew the laces of my dress, parted the bodice, touched my breasts as if they had never been touched. And

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they hadn't — not the way he did it anyway. Rashi and Ketrin, my only other lovers, were boys. Ta was a man who knew women. Before he had removed my dress, his own vest and tunic and leggings, I was infused with pleasure.

"You are a candy," Ta sang, his mouth against my skin, his breath warming my woman hair. "You are sweetness. You are a fruit to be tasted."

It was a long time, hazy with scent and sensation, before he fitted his body to mine and brought us both to a gasping climax. He sang and whispered to me, and I found bits of song in my own throat, bits of song that twined with his as our limbs twined together. "My hungry one, my filled one, my Jamillah." My part was pieces of a rising and falling tune that was utterly unlike my usual harsh or whispered words.

This, more than the exquisite pleasure, filled me with happiness. "Ta," I said, after we had finished, letting it be part of a song. "Ta."

"My Jami-bird has found her voice," he said. He gleamed darkly beside me. "My Jami-bird sings."

Sky Eyes was a Seer, an herbalist, a wise woman, but no singer. I knew no songs except those trapped inside me, only beginning to be freed. Ta sang a lullaby for me, simple in tune and meaning, and I listened and listened and finally sang along, sobbing. "Mother rocks her baby soft, Mother rocks her baby slow, Mother rocks her baby warm, and baby falls asleep."

Somewhere in the center of the singing and crying, I fell asleep.

When I awoke, in the earliest part of morning, Ta was watching me. "So," he said, "my Jami-bird, my night singer, do you still have song in you?"

At first, I thought he meant to share my bed again — or Sky Eyes's bed rather — but he just wanted to hear me sing. I hummed shyly, hiding behind my hair, but the song was there; I could feel it. "Mother rocks her baby soft...." My voice was slight and uncertain, but clear.

Ta's smile was very white in his dark face. "Jamillah, my sweetness, you have — "

An image hit me and I crumpled and cried out. *Ketrin and Sky Eyes.* Ta's arms around me. *Their forms against the curtain of vines.* "What has happened? Jamillah?" *Sky Eyes looking at me through the window of the*

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Seeing, her eyes black, a sliver moon slicing through the blackness. "Jamillah?" She had Seen me with Ta, and this was her answer.

You can't do this, I cried silently.

You did, she replied from the cave, her mind voice angry and hurt. *Why should I not?*

"Jamillah. Tell me what has happened."

The familiar muteness stilled me, but Ta would have none of it. "You can tell Ta, you can. Sing it to me, child. A bit at a time." He held me and listened and stroked and coaxed. "I will not let you keep this silence. Tell me."

Somehow, I made the words come out, singing stubborn bits, stopping to catch my breath and weep. I told of Ketrin and killing my mother and Seeing and Knowing and loving Sky Eyes and hating her. Ta held me like a child, like a lover, like a friend. "You are all right, Jami-bird, all right. This is best, the telling. This is what you must do."

The best thing is usually the hard thing. Sky Eyes's words from the cold, wretched time when I was seven. I wept harder, shaking myself to the bone, shaking Ta, shaking the image of the lovers from my head.

When I was wept out, Ta rubbed my back, sat me up, made me drink some tea. The scent sticks had burnt down to the clay hours before; there was little residue of our sensuous night. Ta groaned and touched my face, which definitely held the residue of my weeping. "Here you are, sadder than when I came."

I laughed, dribbling tea on the sheets. "Not sadder."

"Perhaps not," he said. He looked at me. "Jamillah, this Seeing and Knowing, can you use it at will? Or does it just come when it comes?"

"Both," I said. He nodded at me to explain, and, after a moment, halting over longer phrases, I did. "Sometimes, it comes. One can — try to call a certain image."

"One? Can you?"

I nodded.

"Do you want to stay here?" Ta asked, slowly and deliberately. "If you are happy — if you want to stay — I will say no more."

"Say it," I whispered.

"You could come with me," he said. "As a peddler, I cannot stay long in one place, but if you were there, Seeing and Knowing, brewing potions — we could stay a hand of days. Maybe even two hands."

I was silent. Not because I could not talk, but because I did not know

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what to say. I was only fifteen — not old enough to make that decision. But then, what about the decision I'd had to make at seven? Things must be decided when they come up, not when one is ready to decide. Sky Eyes — had she hesitated to take me? No. Had she regretted doing so? Perhaps lately, but on the whole I thought no. The things she taught me, the things she let me learn for myself, the midnight bread we ate under the stars. Could I leave her? Would I regret doing so?

"Yes," I said, not sure which question I was answering. Of course I would regret it, but girls left their mothers all the time, to marry or take up a trade. In a way, this would be both, for I could read Ta's desire, mingled with his business proposal. My eyes filled with tears again, and Ta gathered me close again. I laughed through my sniffles — after being so careful not to show tears to Ketrin....

"You will miss her," he said, "and she you. But you will come back. It doesn't take Seeing and Knowing to know that."

Sky Eyes face appeared in my mind again, and she too was crying from her night black eyes. "I'm sorry," I said, with my voice as well as my thoughts.

So am I, she sobbed. *So very sorry.*

Ta patted my back, unaware of the exchange. "You must not be sorry. You feel what you feel. You are who you are."

I was barely aware of him. "I will come back," I whispered. "You know I will."

"Of course you will come back," Ta said.

Come back, she said. *Oh, come back, my daughter.* Her image wavered and disappeared, as if our common tears had washed it away.

I didn't take much in the way of glassware and tools; Ta could trade for such things. Several bunches of dried bone leaf, wrapped in paper. I could powder it myself when we reached Shaboor, the next stop. Small amounts of other plants that I would not be able to collect as we traveled — plants that were available in the spring, those that grew only in this area. The blankets from my bed. My few dresses and leggings. My shoes. My mother's cloak, which hadn't dragged on the floor for two years now.

In the summer heat, I put it on and buried my face in the wool of the collar, savoring the warm smell. Sky Eyes had given me back my mother through the touch of her death.

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But she had given me so much more as well. I slung the cloak over my arm and took the shennikan feather from its place on the wall. Not that Ta would be unable to please me, but that I could still please myself. *Thank you, Sky Eyes.* I unhooked the yellow cloth, still bright, with the lizards scampering across it. This I would take as well, a piece of my home, a part of my life. I folded it neatly and placed it on top of the cloak in the smallest of Ta's packs, the one he had cleared for my use by redistributing items in other packs. Before I strapped the top down, I stroked the fabric and sent a silent message. *Thank you, Mother.*

"Ready?" Ta asked, from his place near the pack beast's head. "Are you sure?"

I nodded, secured the strap. This was a hard thing, but a good thing, perhaps the best thing.

"Then we're away," he said. The rhythm of our steps as we set out brought a new song to the back of my throat.

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FILMS

KATHI MAIO

THE WAY IT NEVER WAS

RECENTLY, I watched an A&E "Biography" of America's Sweetheart at mid-century, Doris Day. I had always considered her a very gifted singer and a charming actor, and regretted the way much of the modern backlash against the saccharine wholesomeness of fifties and early sixties popular culture had been leveled against her and her illustrious career.

But how could it be else? She was an icon of her time. As a singer, she had a sweet, clear, emotionally expressive voice with almost all of its blues undertow and sexual sophistication tidied away. And her acting was much the same. She was always smart and capable in her films. And, in most of her movies, she even starts out playing a "careerwoman." But even when she played a high-powered advertising executive (as in *Lover Come Back*) we always knew that all she really wanted was for a man to seduce her and haul her away from the public realm into private, domestic bliss. And, almost always, that's exactly what happened in the final reel.

But the interesting thing about Day's cable biography was that it showed that she was even more representative of her time than her screen image as a "perpetual virgin" would suggest. For Doris, career ambitions and familial roles and obligations were in a constant tug of war. She wanted success. But she also wanted what women were *supposed* to want. Repeatedly, she abandoned her career for marriage. But hearthside happiness was never the tidy conclusion movies (like her own) made it appear. One husband battered her. Another squandered all her money. Again and again, she walked away from bad

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relationships and went back on the bandstand or the soundstage to salvage her finances and her self-esteem. Until, finally, late in life, as a single woman, with wealth restored, she was able to walk away from Hollywood and truly make a private life for herself.

Her own story is much more turbulent and realistically heroic than any of the ones we saw her act in in the fifties and sixties. And the same could be said of her favorite leading man, Rock Hudson — and of any number of other icons of the Eisenhower era. The "kinder, gentler time" we reconstruct from TV Land reruns and movies of the fifties is not our true, tumultuous past. The cultural dissonance of mid-century America has already been explored by scholars. (See, for example, sociologist Stephanie Coontz's fine book *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap,* for a discussion of the reality behind the post-WWII images.) And now, filmmaker Gary Ross tries to expose this same "nostalgia trap" in his directorial debut, *Pleasantville.*

Ross — who co-wrote *Big,* and had another writing success with *Dave* — has first-hand family knowledge of the less than idyllic aspects of the real fifties. His liberal screenwriter father, Arthur Ross (whose credits include the *Creature from the Black Lagoon* monster flicks) was a lesser-known victim of the Hollywood witch hunts. He suffered through "dark gray-listing" (as he called it), relying on low-profile work (in media like radio) to support his family during the most repressive days of that paranoid decade.

In discussing *Pleasantville,* Gary Ross has said that his aim was to lampoon the "bridge to the past" that politicians like Bob Dole have tried to sell us in recent years. He wanted to expose the "mythic utopia" that we have made of the fifties, and show the underside of "[t]his America that nobody really ever had." Through his film, he hoped to argue that longing for an idealized past is no answer to our current social ills. "All you can do," Ross said, "is to tear down your own cynicism and engage your own world."

What a wonderful anti-nostalgia lesson! Too bad *Pleasantville* doesn't really teach it. Instead, Mr. Ross's sweet, funny film merely gently satirizes the conservative values of 1950s situation comedies without ever contrasting them with the real times in which such shows were produced.

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Like its real counterpart shows of the "Father Knows Best" ilk, "Pleasantville" is a late-fifties sitcom that has gained cult status on a nineties rerun cable network. One faithful viewer is a high-schooler named David (*Ice Storm*'s Tobey Maguire). A shy, sensitive lad from a stereotypical "broken" home, David has immersed himself in the solid family values and innocuous plots of a black and white TV show made years before his birth. And who could blame him? At school, teachers recite grim statistics about today's poor career prospects, ecological disasters, and plague-like diseases. And at home, his tense mom screams at his abandoning father on the phone in the kitchen.

David's twin sister, Jennifer (Reese Witherspoon), finds solace in more modern trivial pursuits — mall shopping and promiscuous popularity. But David would rather stay home and escape into his favorite TV show's placid portrait of nuclear family paradise.

Then, on one fateful night, when both siblings have big TV plans but no working remote, a mysterious old repair man (Don Knotts) magically arrives with a new TV controller that he promises packs more "oomph." It does, indeed. In fact, it quickly transports the two teens back into the world of "Pleasantville." David, an expert on the show, immediately realizes that he and his sister have become Bud (a.k.a., Sport) and Mary Sue (a.k.a., Muffin), the children of George (William H. Macy) and Betty (Joan Allen) Parker.

The thoroughly modern Jennifer is aghast to be a pasty-faced player in a black and white world. But David is delighted to be in a realm where a boy's every basketball shot is nothing-but-net perfection, and a dad always comes home — to find a spotless home and a hot meatloaf waiting.

Even after the initial culture shock, Jennifer finds the atmosphere of Pleasantville stifling. It's bad enough that everyone is, like the cinematic Doris Day, a perpetual virgin. But when she learns, in geography class, that the teacher is unaware of anything beyond the ever-sunny town's city limits, she subconsciously resolves to rattle the cage of her pretty prison. David, protective of the town's populace, is dismayed by Jennifer's cavalier willingness to "throw their whole universe out of whack." But, before long, even "Pleasantville's" biggest fan is disrupting the rigid harmony of town life. When "Bud" assures his amiable soda-shop boss, Mr.

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Johnson (Jeff Daniels), that the order of his opening-up rituals can be changed without disastrous results, he sets in motion an entire reassessment of the man's life goals.

Meanwhile, our little Muffin is a one-woman sexual revolution. She explains the birds, bees, and delights of the autoerotic to her new mom. And she deflowers the captain of the basketball team (Paul Walker), giving him, apparently, a vivid new appreciation for the flora around him. Now he sees a normally gray rose in all its crimson glory for the first time.

Which brings us to the movie's primary conceit, the use of color as a symbol of change and liberation. Technically, in terms of the look of the film, this device works marvelously well. The film is gorgeous to look at. Ross and his visual effects team utilized a new form of reverse colorization. They shot the movie in color, and then removed most of the spectrum, in most of the scenes, adjusting the palette of blacks, whites, and grays digitally. *Pleasantville* contains more than 1700 digital effects shots, hundreds and hundreds more than any other live-action film to date. And the great thing about the impressive special effects of the movie is that they actually serve the story.

It's the story itself that doesn't quite work.

Ross uses color as a metaphor for the inner transformation of his characters. Yet some of the first things to colorize are objects like roses and cars. (And I don't think even nifty little roadsters have the power to change from within.) As for what actually puts a peachy glow on the cheeks of the populace, for most of them it is apparently sexual activity. Yet I was frankly surprised that the cheery inhabitants of Pleasantville even possessed genitals. After all, in one of Ross's many sight gags, we learn that the town's bathrooms contain no toilets.

This kind of illogic always bothers me. But it doesn't trouble me as much as a movie that turns preachy without really settling on what the sermon is. Is Ross trying to say that change is necessary and good? Not exactly a radical notion, that. And many of the film's characters actually seem to change very little when they go technicolor. They express a burst of anger. Or they shed a quick tear. They read a book. Or, as I've indicated, they get laid.

The transformative nature of free love is a very sixties notion. But, like most notions in *Pleasantville*, it is not consistently held by the film. It is telling, I think, that

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although most of the film's characters are prompted, by Ross's screenplay, to embrace the uncertainty of the future and "engage [their] own world," the rebellious and already sexually experienced Jennifer is not. At the end of the movie, when the entire town is suffused in nice, bright colors and David prepares to return to his nineties life, sister Jennifer elects to stay in 1958 and lead the very kind of chaste, genteel, studious ("kinder, gentler"?) life that Ross claimed to be exposing as a fraud.

Forget about whether Jennifer's real 1998 mom might miss her. (We might as well forget about it, Ross does.) Still, in accordance with the filmmaker's own philosophy, shouldn't Jennifer go back and engage her nineties world, taking with her the lessons she learned in neverneverland? Could Ross be implying that young women actually need the repressive stability of 1958 sitcom society to keep their life on track? I hope not! In any case, that doesn't seem to be his advice to the older Betty, who appears to be cheerfully embarking on a brave new life, in a menage à trois, no less, at movie's end.

Pleasantville regrettably abounds in just these types of mixed messages. In addition, the film has a tendency to trivialize the very social issues that it goes out of its way to heavy-handedly raise. For example, Ross tries to illustrate cheerful conformity's ugly underbelly by portraying Pleasantville's city fathers, lead by Big Bob (the late, lamented J.T. Walsh), as worried reactionaries. They conspire to crack down on the profusion of color overtaking the populace, by decreeing against it, and arresting those who defy them.

Ross utilizes many powerful images of political oppression in these scenes. Mr. Johnson's soda shop is ransacked. Books (formerly blank, and now filled with subversive words and pictures) are publicly burned. And local businesses start displaying "No Coloreds" signs in their windows.

I must admit that I found that last bit infuriating. *Pleasantville*'s shallow cooptation of a very painful symbol of this country's racist past seemed inappropriate here — especially since the film never does deal with the issue of race or ethnicity. How would the newly tinged but still lily-white citizens of Pleasantville respond to the first dark-skinned person to cross town lines? We never learn, but presumably they'd be welcomed with open arms, since the reactionary impulses of

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Big Bob and his cronies have already been swiftly deflated by David, in a key courtroom scene, simply by getting Big Bob to blow his cool.

Would that fascism were that easy to abrogate! But it is not. And from his own family knowledge of the political repression of the 1950s, Gary Ross knows this, too.

Undoubtedly, Ross's spurious depiction of both the upside and the downside of the fifties wouldn't gall so much if the writer/director had shown, at all, the contrast between the real Eisenhower era and the late fifties of his make-believe town. In the real 1958, all was not sunny prosperity. This country was actually suffering from high anxiety and a good deal of unrest. Here are just a few events from that year: A serious recession and high unemployment unsettled the nation. *Lolita* and *The Ugly American* were published. The Hollywood blacklist was still at the height of its powers. Nuclear protests (following bomb tests by the major powers) increased, and the "peace sign" was introduced. The John Birch Society was founded. Worries about Russian technological superiority prompted the U.S. to launch its first satellites, and test-launch intercontinental ballistic missiles. *The Defiant Ones*, starring Sidney Poitier and Tony Curtis, was released on the screen, as was Orson Welles's brilliant, noirish bordertown drama, *Touch of Evil*, in a studio-edited — i.e., censored — version. And, in Little Rock, and elsewhere, school officials shut down schools rather than complying with a federal mandate to integrate.

Not exactly the prosaic "Leave It To Beaver" placidity of Ross's sitcom town. Of course, that may be the point. But, if so, Ross needed to make it — by counterpointing the real with the make-believe. The fact is that millions of people in *Pleasantville*'s potential theatrical and video audience have no idea how little resemblance exists between sitcom "Pleasantville" and America's past, because they have no direct knowledge of the fifties.

Woody Allen faced a similar challenge in his *Purple Rose of Cairo* — and met it. When Jeff Daniels (again!), as movie character Tom Baxter, steps off the screen and into the life of a mousy waitress named Cecilia (Mia Farrow), he moves from his carelessly prosperous world into another, much harsher environment. And Allen shows us both spheres. In the screen world, rich bon vivants fly from continent to continent on a whim, and frivol the

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night away at fancy nightclubs, sipping champagne. In Depression-era New Jersey, Cecilia can't even hold on to a work-for-tips waitress job. She worries about the rent. And she lives in fear that her drunken gambler husband will knock her around again.

Her life is night-and-day different from that of her madcap screen counterparts. And that's what makes her dependence upon an hour or two lost in a screen fantasy so understandable. And that's also what makes Cecilia's final choice of her own world, and of the imperfect men who populate it, all the more poignant.

If Gary Ross had managed to make the movie he set out to make, one that lifts the mask on those countless fifties sitcoms that really do distort the historical perceptions we hold of an earlier era, he would have made a powerful statement as well as a spectacular fantasy film. But even though *Pleasantville* never debunks an "America that nobody really had, that never really existed," it's still fun to watch.

Besides the gorgeous visual effects, the production design of Jeannine Oppewall *(L.A. Confidential)* and the costuming of Judianna Makovsky both add to the visual pleasures of the movie. The cast, too, is uniformly fine. I was especially moved by Joan Allen as the sitcom mom who escaped the kitchen, and William H. Macy as the sitcom dad disconsolate to find her gone.

In the film's funniest/saddest scene, Macy's George wanders through his dark, empty home plaintively crying, "Where's my dinner?" He is ridiculous, and, somehow, tragic: a haunting symbol of an entire generation of white males who watched it all get away from them.

Is *Pleasantville* worth the trip? Sure. It's not the movie it might have been, but so few are. It certainly ends on a high note, with a progressive coda to the movie's final Pleasantville scene. Betty sits on a park bench with her husband and her lover. One asks "What's going to happen now?" And another happily answers, "I don't know."

Or, as Doris Day would sing, "Que serà, serà!"

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Nick DiChario's last appearance here was back in 1994 with "Drainage." His short stories have previously been nominated for the Hugo and World Fantasy Awards, and have appeared recently in a variety of anthologies. He notes that this story grew out of his feelings as he watched the news reveal the horrors of war-ravaged Bosnia. Back to mind came all those people who said the atrocities of Nazi Germany "could never happen again."

This story, says Nick, is for the victims who even in death refuse to be ignored.

Sarajevo

By Nick DiChario

IN SARAJEVO, AT RADE Koncar Square, Ahmo watched a young boy fall to the bullet of a sniper. The shell blasted into the boy's left ear and exploded out his jaw. The spurt of blood and chunk of meat and bone that was once his delicate, rounded chin burst into the air like a champagne cork. His body collapsed and his neck twisted grotesquely underneath him. This was one of the first things Ahmo saw in Sarajevo. He watched it again and again, unable to believe his eyes.

The boy, for all his ghostly appearance, died his perpetual deaths in exquisite detail: His bruised left elbow hitched against his ribs. The dull olive color of his torn shirt flapped airily in the breeze. A look of utter confusion crossed his face as the bullet introduced itself as smooth as an ice pick to tender skin and fragile bone. Even the dust settled around the boy's broken body as it must have done a century ago, captured by the extravagant miracle of his never-ending death. The boy died with his eyes

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open, questioning, as if there was something about the entire experience he'd just plain misunderstood.

"Excuse me, sir," a smartbot said in metallic English, rolling toward Ahmo on two trim wheels. "Should I call medical assistance for you?" It was an outdated model, short and broad-framed, with arms like brass sticks. It had a square head, no neck, and an old RetnaNet scanner strip for visuals, winking peridot and platinum. "English?" it asked in its scratchy voice. "Do I presume correctly?"

Ahmo felt the summer heat closing in on him. It was a bright afternoon, and there was nowhere to hide from the sun. He must have looked very pale. "I'm all right," he said.

"Very good. Will you please accept reading material from the Sarajevo Council on Spiritual Awareness?" The smartbot had a stack of pamphlets tucked under its stiff arm. It pinched one of the pamphlets with its adept robotic fingers and held it out to him. "By the grace of Allah, you are allowed to tread upon this Holy Soil. Allah offers the Miracle of Ghosts to all people who — *ssschkitch* — travel to Sarajevo. The ghosts are prophets of Allah sent to remind us never to forsake peace. Peace with Allah, peace with one's soul, peace with each other and all living things is paramount. The people of the world are guilty of turning their backs on Sarajevo, but Allah will not permit the world to-to-to *click*, *nnnnnnnn* — so easily forget. Read this pamphlet, please."

"I'll read it." Ahmo folded the paper into his pocket.

"Sir, are you planning to visit Vase Miskin Street and the infamous Bread Queue Massacre?"

"Dobrinja," Ahmo answered.

"If you pass the BQM, maybe it is best for you to — *skeeeeeech* — close eyes. You do not look so good." The smartbot rolled away toward a group of Eastern Indian tourists on the other side of the square.

The machine was right about Miskin Street. Hundreds of ghosts gathered outside what was, during the siege on Sarajevo, the city's only working bakery. On the morning of the massacre, the people came in hopes of buying a loaf of bread for their families with what little money they had. Ahmo knew from what his grandmother had told him that the people had no food, no water, no electricity, their telephones had all been cut off. They suffered the indignity of inadequate sanitation. They had not

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eaten eggs, meat, fruits or vegetables for many months. They survived on bread and rain water and what little rice they received from humanitarian aid.

The grenades exploded in the center of the crowd. Arms and legs were thrown into the air, landed on nearby balconies. Blood flowed down Vase Miskin Street.

This was Sarajevo in the year 1992, and 2092, and all the years in-between. Welcome.

Ahmo stepped into the shadows of a decrepit building of worn and crumbling Jerusalem stone. He wiped the sweat from his face with a bandanna already dampened by perspiration. He dug in his pocket, unfolded the pamphlet the smartbot had given him, and read a quote from the *Holy Qur'an:*

"...Men began to fear the strong and oppress the weak,
To boast in prosperity, and curse in adversity.
And to flee each other, pursuing phantoms,
For the truth and reality of Unity
Was gone from their minds."

Ahmo wanted nothing more than for the truth and reality of this horrible place to be gone from his mind. He had to remind himself of why he'd come. He'd come for his beloved grandmother. He'd made her a promise he would not break. He reached in his hip pack for the gold ring Grandmother Ivana had given him on the day she'd died, felt it at his fingertips, brought it to his lips. "Soon," he whispered. "Soon I will take you home."

Ahmo stepped out of the shadows and walked toward the suburb of Dobrinja, where Grandmother Ivana had lived when she was just a little girl.

Ahmo rushed into his grandparents' small brownstone on the outskirts of Greenwich. He was late for Grandmother Ivana's death. He hadn't meant to be late, but the tube from East Jersey had stalled twice, and the demonstration against new government regulations on webnet virtuware had drawn thousands, clogging up eight blocks of prime downtown real estate.

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"I can't wait around here all afternoon," said the Hemlock technologist, a petite young woman with a stiff posture aimed at Ahmo's grandfather. She wore a gray blazer, tight skirt, and a pair of black pumps that made her feet look large. "I've got two more deaths scheduled before six o'clock."

Grandfather's face turned crimson. "We pay Hemlock advance for job, you are going to *do* job. Or else you refund money. *All* of money!" He smacked his hands together.

Grandmother Ivana smiled up at Ahmo from the quilted sofa. In spite of all her sickness, she looked beautiful. She wore a long, silky, agate-blue wrap over an ivory-colored gown. She'd primped her hair, and Ahmo could see a trace of makeup on her blanched face. She was not even shaking much today. Ahmo took a moment to savor this picture of her.

The Hemlock lady noticed Ahmo standing just inside the parlor. "Is this the young man we've been waiting for?"

The woman's voice no longer sounded quite so tart. Not many women could remain angry around Ahmo. He had what his grandmother called "pouty little lips" and a baby boy's complexion. He'd inherited his mother's long, thin face and thick black hair, his father's strong chin and sky-blue eyes. Ahmo had developed a lean and muscular physique from his years of high school and collegiate basketball; and his job as assistant basketball coach at East Jersey University kept him fit and trim. The fact that he was an English Lit intern, teaching under a highly respected professor at the university, was something he kept to himself until he met a woman impressed by such things, a rare occurrence in his social circles that still revolved mainly around basketball and his not-so-mature college buddies.

"Ahmo," said his grandmother, "I knew you would come." She spoke to Ahmo as if no one else were in the room. His grandmother had always talked to him this way, even when he was a child. She'd always made him feel special. Ahmo was almost thirty years old now and still hadn't found anyone else who could do that for him. There were plenty of women who wanted his body, and vice versa to be sure, but *special* was hard to come by. This was one of the reasons he didn't want Grandmother Ivana to go through with the euthanasia. Selfish, but true.

"I'm sorry I'm late," he said, not really meaning it. "It wasn't my fault. The tube stalled, and the demonstration downtown — "

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"It's all right, Ahmo," said his grandmother.

The young woman smoothed her woolen jacket. "I don't believe we've met," she said.

Grandmother said, "Miss March, this is my grandson, Ahmo. He'll be your second witness. Ahmo, this is Miss March. She's single."

Miss March smiled. "The pleasure is all mine."

She had the sort of pinched face that made a smile look pained and exaggerated. She smelled too strongly of powdery perfume, putting Ahmo in mind of the funeral homes her clients were one step away from. He said, "I'm glad you can find some pleasure in this."

His grandmother frowned. "Ahmo, don't be like that. Miss March is a kind young girl. You know I want this or she wouldn't be here."

"I know, but that doesn't mean I want it." Ahmo knelt beside his grandmother and held her hand. "Can't I talk you out of this?"

"Stubborn boy, just like your grandfather. We've been all through this. I'm one hundred twelve years old and modern medicine has run out of miracles for me. It's time for me to go."

"Time to go! Time to go!" snapped Grandfather. He stormed into the kitchen. "That's all you've said for the past three months. Go then. Get it over!"

Ivana smiled. "You'll watch out for your grandfather when I'm gone, won't you, Ahmo? He's not so young anymore."

"Of course I will," Ahmo answered uneasily. He knew Grandmother Ivana was ready to die. She had made all of the preparations with Hemlock and had undergone the required psychological evaluations. She had even thought to make Ahmo executor of her estate, whatever that meant to a woman who coveted so few possessions. But Ahmo was not ready to let her go.

He thought about his family. Ahmo's parents, along with his sister and brother-in-law and their three children, lived a long way off, in George Washington Province, the new American colony in Canada. They would be angry when they learned of Ivana's passing. They would want to know why Ahmo hadn't notified them sooner. It was Grandmother's wish, he would tell them. She had not wanted anyone else to watch her die.

"It's time! It's time!" Grandfather hollered from the kitchen. "Let her go!"

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Miss March placed what looked like a hard-plastic fishing creel on the end table. She snapped it open and removed some needles wrapped in white linen.

Ahmo glanced around the small parlor where he had spent so much of his time since the rest of his family had moved north. The antique poster on the wall from the 1984 Olympics in Sarajevo glinted in its burnished frame. His parents had bought it at an auction and had given it to Ivana on her one hundredth birthday. He'd often caught his grandmother staring at it, appearing as if she might cry. He touched the large, round area-rug at his knees that he and his sister had helped Grandmother Ivana braid and sew when they were just children. Ahmo suddenly wished he'd gotten stuck in the tube, or lost in the crowd downtown. Anything, anything other than this.

Ivana cupped Ahmo's chin and gently pulled him closer. She kissed his forehead. She had the most beautiful plum-colored eyes he'd ever seen. They appeared liquid and hypnotic, like wine. Ahmo couldn't imagine no longer having those eyes to look into for warmth, for comfort, for his own sense of family and personal history. It was amazing that this old, frail woman had come to mean so much.

"Ahmo," she said, "what are you holding on to? I'm happy. I'm free to say, *this is how I want to die.* Do you understand?"

Ahmo understood, but he could not embrace it. His love was too strong.

Ivana brushed her fingers through his coarse hair. "Listen to me. I have something important to ask of you. A last request. Will you promise to do something for me after I'm gone?"

"Of course. Anything." Ahmo kissed his grandmother's fingers. Her palms were clammy. He noticed that he'd been trying to warm her hands with his own, caressing them as if they were sticks he might alight by rubbing them briskly together.

"I want you to go back. I want you to go back to Sarajevo for me."

"Go back? Oh, Grandmother, I, I don't know...Sarajevo..."

"Please," she said. "It is my last wish. I have set aside the money for the trip. It will cost you nothing but your time."

Ahmo hesitated. He did not relish the thought of seeing the Miracle of Ghosts, of watching his ancestors die their horrible deaths.

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"Your mother will never go back. She's afraid. I can't blame her. Maybe she's too close to it."

What choice did Ahmo have? How could he say no to this beautiful woman, his precious grandmother? This was her last wish. "All right, I'll go if it's that important to you."

Ivana lifted her left hand and removed the gold ring from around her finger. She placed the ring in Ahmo's hand. "Take this ring and bring it to Dobrinja, bring it to my home. I have all the information written out for you, with a map. When you get there, just leave the ring on the ground. That's all I ask. The ring has been with me all these years, and I want to return it. This is my dying wish." Ivana's lips quivered, her delicate jaw trembled, her eyes filled with tears. "Oh, look at me. I promised I wouldn't cry."

"I hate to sound all business," said Miss March, "but I'll need Ahmo to sign the witness statement now." She said this to no one in particular, but Ahmo took it as a blow to his heart.

"All right." He stood and quickly signed the paper without reading it. He did not want to linger over this task. He felt as if he were signing his grandmother's death sentence.

"Is it done yet?" Grandfather yelled from the kitchen. "Are you dead yet, Ivana?"

Ivana laughed nervously and brushed away her tears. "No, not yet. Make a pot of coffee. By the time it's perked I'll be dead. Make decaffeinated. You'll be up all night if you don't."

"We're out of decaf!" he shouted. "I put it on the list but you never bought it."

"I bought it. Look in the refrigerator behind the pickles. How are you going to live without me? Tomorrow I won't be around to tell you where to find things." Then she looked into Ahmo's eyes. "*Cuvajte se*, little Ahmo, take care of yourself. I love you with all my heart."

Ahmo clutched the ring in his hand, and stepped behind the sofa, where Grandmother Ivana could not see his pain.

Ahmo walked past "sniper alley" in Sarajevo, and watched an ambulance driver lose control of his vehicle after he'd been shot in the neck. The ambulance spun out of control, flipped over, and crashed silently into a

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café. The injured victims in the ambulance spilled out onto the street like lumber from a broken sheaf.

Outside the general headquarters of UNPROFOR, the United Nations Protection Force, a woman from the humanitarian agency Equilibre burned to death after being caught in the flames of a Molotov cocktail. She was most likely killed by a Chetnik guerrilla. The Chetniks took great pleasure in the killing of volunteers, women, and children.

The sky was cloudless, the sun beat down mercilessly. Ahmo's eyes stung and his mouth felt sandy from the blowing dust. He could feel the skin on the back of his neck beginning to sunburn. He walked the road between Butmir and Dobrinja. The southwest was one of the hardest hit in all of Sarajevo during the war. There were no trees or mountain ranges to protect it.

At the old airport, Hercules airplanes packed with medical relief and rice and beans from the West came under heavy anti-aircraft fire, and crashed one after another as they attempted to land. There was a phosphorescent gleam to their aerial distress that made the sky itself look drunk and confused.

Ahmo watched for a while, and began to wonder if these tired old airplanes were fed up with crashing and burning over and over again, if their pilots had long ago given up trying to set down safely. Had Allah truly asked them to do this great thing, to make this sacrifice? *Haunt Sarajevo!* Ahmo imagined Allah commanding, and then he saw thousands of Sarajevans, legions of the dead, spirit-zombies, obeying their one true God.

A smartbot from the Bureau of Tourism approached Ahmo as he stood in front of the airport. It said, "Slovák? English? Deutsch? Italiano? Français? Español? — "

"English," Ahmo interrupted.

"Good day, sir," it began without pause. "Do you know what started all the killing in Sarajevo? Do you know the details behind the Bosnia-Herzegovina vote for independence from the Federal Socialist Republic of Yugoslavia, and how the Serbian Democratic Party violently disagreed? Would you like to learn the truth about the evil war criminals Milosevic and Karadzic and their policies of ethnic cleansing and genocide?"

This smartbot was tall and thin, a newer model sporting copper alloy

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legs and knee joints, a pristine voice chip, glass eyes that looked almost real, and an exoskeleton the color of almond, giving it the appearance of a walking corpse. The 'bot was wearing a navy-blue smock with an official patch on its breast, and holding a neatly wrapped computer virtuware package in its dull, brass hand.

It clicked and hummed forward. "Why did the Europeans and Americans, the holy and righteous people of the civilized world who prided themselves on their humanitarianism, allow the slaughter of innocent victims when they could have easily put an end to it? Why was this peaceful city allowed to degenerate into the world's largest concentration camp? You can learn all about it from this commemorative Sarajevo virtuware, the only presentation package sanctioned by the Sarajevo Historical Society."

Ahmo looked past the smartbot. Another aircraft spun out of control on the runway, tipped over, and snapped a wing. A fiery mushroom of bleached smoke consumed the plane.

"Walk the streets of Sarajevo, the City of Tolerance, before it was completely destroyed by the war and inhabited by ghosts. Learn how the Croats, Jews, Muslims, Catholics, and even the Serbs lived in peace for centuries, side by side. See exclusive interviews with Sarajevans who miraculously escaped the violence. Hear theories from internationally renowned mystagogues on why the hauntings continue to transpire. All of this can be yours for only two thousand dinars, the same amount of money it once cost for one-half kilo of macaroni here in Sarajevo during the terrible war of aggression!"

Ahmo donated the money to the Historical Society in German Deutchmarks, the preferred tender in the Balkan region, but told the smartbot he did not have the stomach for its virtuware.

In Dobrinja, there was nothing left but collapsed mosques and synagogues, ruined minarets and housing complexes, and ghosts forever dying. Ahmo was swiftly learning to ignore them, just as the world had learned to ignore the real thing so many years ago. But Ahmo felt as if he had earned this right. He was one of them now, under siege with the incendiaries, mortars, cannons, and snipers silently stalking him.

Ghosts, now, were everywhere...

dancing...

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dancing...

So many had died here that the phantoms expired in paranormal heaps, creating numinous silhouettes of multiple executions, of blood and brains and entrails superimposed over torn flesh, exposed bone, and silently screaming faces — a macabre choreography of vision and light, transparency and color, life and death. There was an absurd, mythical quality to all of it that was just now beginning to take shape in his mind, a fuzzy surrealism, a sense of floating adrift in a psychotic nightmare that neither permitted him to succumb to its terrors, nor played itself out of its own accord. Ahmo was nothing more than a prisoner waiting to be set free from Sarajevo, this land of restless, tortured spirits.

Finally it was the ring, of all things, the ring burning in Ahmo's hand that released him, centered him, made him remember who and what he was and why he was there. Somehow Grandmother Ivana's ring had gotten from his hip pack into the palm of his hand and had it not been for this delicate band of gold, he might very well have become a ghost himself.

By the time Ahmo found his grandmother's building, he was both mentally and physically exhausted. He felt the hot wind on his face. Sweat streamed down his ribs. He sipped water from the canteen he'd purchased in the gift shop at the Sarajevo Marriott. He wanted only to fulfill his promise and be gone.

Ahmo watched a family blown to literal bits in his grandmother's old building. At first they were just sitting there. Then a little girl ran into the room. The bomb hit and the room caved in on them. The little girl looked so much like his grandmother that Ahmo watched the scene unfold again and again, trying to peer through the other ghosts and study her face.

His grandmother had been one of the lucky children. She'd gotten out before the winter, before temperatures of below zero forced people to burn furniture in their stoves to keep from freezing. When the mortar fire hit, Ivana was not killed. The rest of her family had died but she'd survived with only minor cuts and bruises and some ringing in her ears that would not clear for many months. The day after the bombing, a delegation from The Children's Embassy spirited her away among a group of Italian journalists. From there she'd been placed in an American home.

This girl's resemblance to Ahmo's grandmother was uncanny — the structure of her cheeks and the curvature of her jaw, the delicate nose and

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lofty forehead, the upturned lips and small mouth. Ahmo had heard that as people grew older they began to resemble their childhood likenesses. Perhaps this thought moved him forward. The ghost of the young girl glanced in his direction, and Ahmo saw clearly, for the first time in this hauntingly familiar child, his grandmother Ivana's dark, plum eyes.

No. It was not possible. His grandmother had escaped to America. She could not have been killed in Sarajevo. Perhaps this was a cousin, or even a sister he'd never heard about. How many of his ancestors had died in this building? It was so long ago. Perhaps Ahmo was beginning to see ghosts of his own design on top of ghosts on top of ghosts.

Whatever it was, he'd had enough. He could not take the sight of any more death. He placed the gold ring on the ground, among the ruins, just as Grandmother Ivana had instructed him to do. He was ashamed to admit that he was glad to be rid of it. He turned his back on the building and strode away. But something stopped him. Ahmo could not say what. He turned around to look one last time at the young girl who had died her horrible death over and over again in this building, her eternal coffin.

But on this occasion something very different happened. The girl did not go running into the room. She stopped short. Her beautiful wine-colored eyes caught a golden wink in the summer sunlight on the ground where Ahmo had laid his grandmother's ring. She walked over to it and reached for the tiny circle of yellow light. The grenade struck again, but this time the girl was not in the room. This time she was thrown out onto the street. She rolled across the pavement, almost to Ahmo's feet, and began to cry.

She was alive!

And then the scene faded. The little girl vanished. She no longer lay crying on the street; she longer appeared in the ghostly reincarnation of her family's death. She was not *anywhere*.

Ahmo walked back to the place where he'd dropped Grandmother Ivana's ring. It was gone. His grandmother's ring was gone.

Ahmo sat on the quilted sofa and cradled Ivana's head and shoulders. She was so light her spirit might have already fled her body. It had been six minutes since the Hemlock technologist, Miss March, had administered the fatal injection. Miss March said it would take no more than ten

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minutes for his grandmother to die, for the Seconal and Lace to furnish her a painless, peaceful, dreamy death.

Ivana's eyes were closed, but she smiled thinly, and whispered, "Ahmo."

"I'm here, Grandmother."

"Have I ever told you how fortunate I was to survive Sarajevo? Not so many people were lucky like me." Her voice was very weak.

"You were meant to live," Ahmo whispered in her ear. He gently squeezed his grandmother's shoulders, as if his hands held the power to keep her forever by his side.

"Sometimes I dream of Sarajevo," she said, "but in my dreams it is always beautiful and peaceful. No one is afraid. I am with my family. We are all alive and happy. Isn't that nice, Ahmo? It was strange when the bomb hit our home. I was running to my mother, but then I saw a light, just a twinkle of light, and I thought it was Allah calling me."

His grandmother had not mentioned Allah in many years. Ahmo's family had given up the old ways, the old religion. Ahmo himself had followed his parents in having no particular religious associations. He wished now that it was not so. It would have been nice to have a god to pray to at a time like this, a god who cared.

"I can see that light again, Ahmo," she said. "I can see it. A twinkle...just a twinkle...far off...calling me..."

Ahmo forced himself to smile through his tears. He gripped the ring in the palm of his hand and thought of Sarajevo. For some reason the journey no longer frightened him. Grandmother Ivana had made him feel special one last time.

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What would a mild-mannered university President Emeritus like Robin Wilson know about grifting? Well, Mr. Wilson recently gave your humble editor a walking tour of his California hometown of Carmel. Around the corner from a tavern owned by Clint Eastwood, we happened to see a fender-bender occur. As the ensuing drama (starring the hostile driver and the earnest witness) began to unfold, Robin checked his watch, nodded, and said, "You probably think it was easy to arrange such entertainment for our guests."

What would mild-mannered Mr. Wilson know about grifting? Read on and see.

The Grift of the Magellanae

By Robin Wilson

ALTHOUGH BOBBY JUNCO has never taken much note of tales of UFOs, of extraterrestrials skulking on mysterious errands, he does not long doubt that the two creatures who show up one April morning in his Manzanita Street storefront office are just that.

His first glimpse of them sparks a phrase from his beginnings in show business, when he was still a kid doing summer road company Shakespeare thirty years before:...*none of woman born*. But it takes him a while to accept the evidence of his senses.

"I mean," he says early that afternoon to Marianne Kusic in the Downtown Diner, "they looked sort of human, even kinda — uh — *cute* I guess. Maybe five feet tall, tops, great big wet-lookin' eyes like on all those little dolls and animals you got, real bushy eyebrows that kinda wiggle a lot, little pointy ears sticking straight up, couple of holes for a nose with — um — whiskers kinda like a cat's, little tiny mouths without hardly any lips and what looks sorta like a snake's tongue when they talk. I mean they were *weird*."

Marianne sets his hamburger and fries on the damp counter between

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them. Tall in starchy peach, blonde hair up, a pencil inserted above her left ear, she is wary of Bobby's wild tales, even wilder schemes. The son of a roustabout and a short-lived tattooed lady about whom he has only fragmentary — albeit colorful — memories, he has spent nearly all but the last five of his forty-eight years in show business, mostly carnivals. He feels at home in a world of humbug and illusion that she does not think she can share, which saddens her. She believes Bobby loves her — as she does him — but she despairs that she can take a hand in those enterprises which seem so much a part of him.

"So what were they wearing?" she asks him.

Bobby shakes his head: "Christ, I don't know what they had on, babe. They were — uh — kinda furry with some kinda plastic here, some shiny stuff there."

"Were you scared? I sure would've been."

"Well, for a second there I figured they were carnies working somebody's show, couple of freaks the guys down at The Wet Spot had sicced on me, and then I took a good look. And you know what, Marianne? By the time I wound up here in the boonies, man and boy, I'd been with B & B and then Sanders Bros. Amusements what? Thirty-five years? And before I started doin' advance, I was ride jockey for the Tilt-O-Spin, steered for the Monte table, was a barker for Mr. Lifto, hyped every sideshow exhibit they had. I mean your two-headed calves and your fat lady and your human goat and the geek bit the heads off of live chickens — all that shit, and I never, *never* saw anything like these two."

"So what'd you do?" Marianne can linger a little with her lover; it is a quiet Tuesday and most of the noon-hour crowd is gone.

"Mouthed off smart," Bobby says ruefully. "Like I sometimes do. Couldn't believe my own eyes...."

"How come? What'd they want?" Bobby's uncharacteristic admission of folly intrigues Marianne, and there *has* been some excitement that day, during the breakfast rush, route drivers, couple of deputies, talking about strange lights over Gavilan Mountain, sounds in the night. The line boss out at the Crooked J Ranch said he glimpsed a couple of *somethings* alongside the road as he was driving into town.

"I couldn't believe it," continues Bobby. "One of them said they were looking for..." His voice trails off, lost in his own disbelief.

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"What? What'd they want?"

"I swear it said — *representation*, for God's sake. They were looking for someone who could tell their story to the world." His voice dies, a terminal case of chagrin.

"And...?"

"Dumb. Without thinking anything but blow out those wise-asses at The Wet Spot, I said, 'You people want Roswell, New Mexico, not Granger City, California. You go on up to the next corner there, that's Shasta Avenue, hang a left, and then it's about thousand miles southeast.'"

"So what'd they say?"

"Nothing. Looked at each other a second, turned and went out. By the time I got my brains back in my head and realized I'd kissed off the best grift ever fell in a flack's lap and got up off my dead ass and went out to the sidewalk, they were gone. I mean, it couldn't of been five seconds, but they were just plain *gone!*"

Bobby takes a bite of hamburger, chews thoughtfully, swallows, adds: "Gotta be some kinda Scotty thing, beams 'em up."

"And this was this morning? Like just a couple hours ago?" Marianne is now truly intrigued. "There were guys here talking about weird stuff." She gives a brief account of reports in the morning rush hubbub, lights in the sky, strange sounds, unsettling sights.

"Ah, jeez." Bobby can only shake his head. "They gotta be the real thing, and I blew it."

But he has not blown it; the two creatures reappear at his little ten-by-twenty office again late that afternoon. When the bell over the door jingles, he looks up from his computer, where he has PageMaker running and is putting together a new menu and window card for the Mother Lode Restaurant, and there they are again, standing in front of the arched letters on the open glass door that say, ROBERT JUNCO ASSOCIATES. PUBLIC RELATIONS - ADVERTISING - VINYL SIDING.

The golden-fur one lisps, "Rothwell doesn't have what we want."

"Ith too commerthial," says the one with reddish fur, who differs also in the round lumps on its upper torso which Bobby takes for breasts, although there are three of them and they are arranged vertically.

Elated by this reprieve from his morning's blunder, Bobby rises to his

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feet all smiles, ready to accommodate anything: "Come in — uh — folks. Sit down! Tell me how I can help you."

Red fur shakes its head in a very human manner, and it occurs to Bobby that maybe they can't sit, perhaps their bodies don't bend that way. How could you tell?

Gold fur swivels a fanny pack around to its front — an ordinary maroon nylon one that has "SierraCraft" embroidered on it in white — and fishes out a wad of bills with one richly fingered hand. "Thith is for you," it says. "You have a photographic devithe?"

"Camera? Gee, sure." Bobby accepts the wadded bills without counting. However much it is, it is enough. "I got a pretty good Canon SLR I use for scouting shots. I don't do glamour or porn, although I know a guy..."

"We want you to make a picture, prove to humans we are real and we have come in peathe," gold fur says.

"Hey, not a problem." Bobby has the camera in hand, inspects it. "I got twenty exposures left on the roll. But why'n't you let me set up a press conference, Elks Lodge, maybe the high school gym? Photo op?"

"No," says gold fur sharply, "and only a thingle exposure!" Then with some very human hesitation in its voice it says, "We do not want to rithk appearanthe — ah — *in vivo* — until...our peathful presenth here...in thith thythtem is — ah — more fully acthepted."

"No peasanth with pitchforkth," says red fur.

Bobby shrugs. "Okay, you're the customers. Why'n't you and — uh — the mister here, why'n't you stand over there, in front of my sign. And here's a copy of today's *Granger City Post & Review*. Why'n't you hold it in front of you, yeah, open like that, and I'll make sure it's in the picture and they'll go nuts down there at the *Post & Review*."

And nuts they do indeed go down there at the *Granger Post & Review*, but not the way Bobby hopes. He tells Marianne about it that evening, early in one of his increasingly more frequent nights with her in her battered old doublewide, all that remains to her from twenty years of marriage to an over-the-road trucker who spun out three years before on the downgrade leading to the Grapevine on I-5 just north of Los Angeles, most of the state to the south.

"They said the picture was cool but hadda be a fake," he says, standing

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at the sink counter, an onion in one hand, paring knife in the other. "Beautiful shot, these two little aliens standing there lookin' at each other with those big eyes, copy of the paper spread out. You can count on one of their hands seven fingers *showing*, for God's sake."

"And they wouldn't run it?" Marianne delights in her time with Bobby — better than any evening of her marriage — even though her hopes for their relationship are more bitter than sweet when he takes off into one of his grandiose schemes.

Bobby chops the onion with short, vicious strokes. "Oh they'll run it all right. Paid me fifty bucks for it. But they'll run it as a big ha-ha. Feature editor said she thought the aliens were real cute. *Cute!* for God's sake. Wanted to know how I'd come up with it. Her boss said it'd be a great gimmick for taking the steam outta what the Air Force over at Hanner Field's calling public hysteria."

They are comfortably domestic in their evenings together, although after a day in the diner Marianne doesn't want anything to do with standing at a stove. And so Bobby usually brings a pizza with him or cooks up one of his half-dozen regular dishes, and she showers and puts on something kind of thin so all the stuff she is still proud of at forty-two will show through a little, and sits at the tiny kitchen table while he works. Every inch of kitchen wall not occupied by a door or window or the sparse cabinetry bears shelves and whatnots loaded with ceramic figurines à la Dresden and Hummel and furry creatures from Disney and Steiff, a childless woman's collection of cute and cuddly kitsch.

"But the people at the paper, they don't believe the picture is for real?" Marianne asks.

"Sonsabitches think I had to of faked it, just 'cause I, you know, did carny posters and handbills all those years and got pretty good doin' art and layout and stuff with the computer. Said I was trying to make a buck outta whatever it was happened last night, those lights and sounds you said they were talking about in the diner."

Bobby pauses for a rare sip of introspection. "Eddie Bruscoe, the publisher down there?"

"Uh-huh. He comes in the diner sometimes."

"He said I was nothing but a scam artist trying to diddle a bunch of foolish people who thought they saw something."

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"Well, Bobby hon, you *have* pulled some swifties..." Marianne's voice holds the lilt of logic.

"But I have this great photo!"

"Yeah, and you had pretty good pictures of that guy two years ago, looked like Elvis..."

"I never said it *was* Elvis, did I?" Bobby's voice holds as much pride as defense.

"...and then last August, that whatchamacallit, that abominable snowman, that yentl..."

Bobby laughs ruefully. "Well, yeah. You got me there. But it was a swell photo. Shot of that llama from out at Acker's farm and the gorilla scanned in from *Life* magazine and a couple of hours with Photoshop..."

"...so it isn't all that much a wonder they didn't go for it down at the paper," continues Marianne.

"You're saying I lack, like, credibility?"

Marianne assumes the arch tones she imagines appropriate to society matrons: "Well, my dear, you *do* rather have that reputation."

Bobby's shoulders slump in acknowledgment of an unpleasant truth to which he is no stranger, and for the moment wordless, he dumps the onion shards into hot grease along with two small rib-eyes.

Every rodent and cockroach within a nine-iron shot of the doublewide's range vent rejoices at the promising odor.

The aliens are back early the next afternoon, the one with the bumps on its front waving that morning's *Granger City Post & Review* in an all-too-human gesture of displeasure. Bobby has already seen the front page, which carries his photograph of the two under a subhead: UFOS? AIR FORCE SAYS LIGHTS NOT THEIRS. The caption under the photo is, "Local Man's Photo of Aliens? Cute, But We Think Not!"

"The newspaper quethtions our exihtenthe!" says Bumps. "Did not you exthplain? Did not you tell them that we are the Magellanae and have come in peathe?"

"Jeez," says Bobby apologetically, "I tried. But they didn't believe the photo was the real thing. Too easy to fake something like that."

The two look at each other, their eyebrows semaphoring madly. Then the being with the golden fur once again fishes around in its SierraCraft

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pack and withdraws another bundle of bills. "We are now prepared to rithk animothity and hold a preth conferenth in order to convinth humans we are real."

Bobby is overjoyed. A press conference! He smells some real money. He will have to come up with a contract; exclusive representation. And he will need to do some fast advance publicity, promote a crowd. "Great!" he says, retrieving his camera, looking for the fresh roll of film he has been wise enough to buy. "Let's get lots more photos. For the advance stuff."

"No!" says gold fur, its eyebrows squirming like injured caterpillars. "The time is past for mere photographth! Please make thuitable arrangementh. Make them thubthtantial. Cotht is not a conthideration. We will return in one day to learn your plans."

This time when they leave they do not bother to go out onto the sidewalk. Right there in Bobby's office they shimmer and shrink to a pair of dots and depart with a moist and vaguely embarrassing sound.

THAT EVENING the cockroaches and rodents rejoice once more as Bobby perfumes the trailer park with his preparation for another evening with Marianne. She is happy enough to see him two nights in a row. She thinks he is a handsome man — if just a little short for her — and she knows that in the thirty years since he reached his majority, he has been single once more frequently than married. Their relationship has been evolving comfortably toward permanence, a consummation she much desires, although her doubts about their future are now heightened by his most recent venture. While unlike most in Granger City, she truly believes Bobby's tale about the aliens, she fears her belief may be love trumping reason.

But there it is. She knows that Bobby will not change, that if they are to become in some sense one, she must alter what she is, a bumpkin, her lifetime spent in the vast, sparsely populated high cattle-and-timber country of Modoc County, far up north where California and Nevada shoulder Oregon. If she can do it, accept Bobby for what he is, join in with him in what he does, it will be worth it. They have something going: she knows, for example, that it is not sex, certainly not delight in his own

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cooking, that brings Bobby back to the doublewide so swiftly, so often, but the need for counsel, and maybe that is even better than any of those other ingredients in a relationship.

"So what is it, hon," she says, this dinner hour still in her starchy work clothes, a fugitive strand of yellow hair down one cheek, one hand wrapped around a bottle of Sierra Pale Ale before her on the kitchen table. "The aliens?" Behind her head a rack on the wall holds three white plates she ordered from the Franklin Mint; they display large-eyed children costumed as Santa's elves.

"Yeah." Bobby stands at the counter once more, chopping blade in hand, something savory bubbling on the range. "They showed up again this afternoon. They were pissed that the picture didn't prove to the guys at the newspaper that they weren't, you know, bogus."

"Well I'll tell you," Marianne says, "the photo didn't convince much of anybody at the diner this morning, either. That line boss? Guy said he saw some kind of things out on Gavilan Road early yesterday? He took a lot of razzing."

"But he *did* see something didn't he?"

"Who knows? Now he says he could have been still half asleep or there was something splashed up on his windshield."

"My photo didn't convince him? Any of them?"

Marianne is slow to respond. "No," she says finally, and her voice holds something. "They all liked the picture, thought those things were cute, but...."

Bobby turns from his surgery on a frozen chicken breast. "What? What aren't you telling me? What're people saying about my photo? About me?"

Marianne takes a long pull on her beer, swallows, shakes her head, sighs. "Aw honey, they're laughing, calling the whole thing another one of 'Junco's buncos.'"

"How..." Bobby's voice catches. He peers at her from under impressively chiseled eyebrows, repeats: "How...about you?"

"Ah, not a doubt, hon."

Wordlessly, Bobby returns to his chicken breasts. He draws, quarters, and thinks deeply. He shreds scallions, chops carrots, dices tomatoes, thinks even more deeply. "Thing is," he says after a while, "now they say

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they want me to lay on a humongous press conference to demonstrate they're the real McCoy."

"Oh Bobby, that's wonderful. That's what you wanted isn't it?"

"Yeah, but now I'm not so sure. I know I'm not exactly a rocket scientist, but I been hustling shucks a long time, and these two aliens, I think they been...*using* me."

Marianne says, "Well, sure. They been paying you too, haven't they?"

"Yeah, big bucks." Chicken and grease sputter and Bobby raises his voice: "The thing that pisses me is, I don't think they've been paying me for what I can do as a, you know, a P-R *professional,* but for what I *haven't* done, for what I *am*."

"Which is?"

"A scam artist! A con man! A double dealer! A flim-flam man!"

"Aw, hon...." There is sympathy in Marianne's voice along with the acknowledgment of truth.

The sputtering chicken subsides and so does Bobby's voice. "They're right, and I'm not ashamed of it. I been doing the dipsy-doodle since I was a little kid. If I'd of, you know, had the family, had the dough to go to college, I'd of ended up in one of those big agencies, doing TV ads for cars or stuff to keep people's false teeth in, or maybe big-time, politics, things like that." Bobby looks off into space, into the great what-might-have-been: *Batten, Barton, Durstin & Junco.* "Hell, I'm not ashamed of what I am, I just thought I was better at it."

"What do you mean?"

"I got my pride, haven't I? I'm a bullshitter, and you shouldn't oughtta be able to bullshit a bullshitter. But they been bullshittin' me, those two aliens. If they'd of wanted to prove they were for real, they'd of had me do a press conference right off the bat like I told 'em. But nooo! All's they wanted was a single picture, one lousy photo, which they knew damn well everyone'd assume is a fake 'cause it's so easy to do."

Bobby lets that sink into Marianne's mind. And his own. And then more sure of his supposition he continues: "The way I figure it, they or things like them have been around here a long time, since at least that business down in New Mexico in the late forties, early fifties. Long enough anyway to have the language down pretty cold, talk like a couple of professors. But they been keeping it as secret as they could, only every

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once in a while some bunch of 'em have an accident or something and people see things. Then they got a problem with the cover-up. Then they got to get to somebody or kludge up some records that prove it was all some kinda dummies being tested or some kinda experimental plane the government didn't want to let on about."

Marianne nods solemnly. "They must've learned a lot about us from all those people they've kidnapped, one time or another. I saw a thing about that on the Fox Network..."

"Yeah. And like night before last. I bet something went wrong and these two local ones accidentally let out some sounds and some lights, and whatever beams them up or down beamed them down alongside of the Gavilan Road for a minute, where that rancher saw them."

"So?" Marianne is honestly puzzled. "If what you figure is right and they're busting their butts to keep their being here a secret, why do they want you to, like, publicize them? That doesn't make sense."

Bobby turns away from the stove to look at Marianne, to project his seriousness. He has an impressive shock of iron-gray hair combed back from the low V hairline of a teenager. Over his customary short-sleeved white dress shirt and inevitable red bow tie he wears a filmy black apron they bought for her on one of their weekends of R&R in Reno. Embroidered in gold across its front is, HOW DO YOU LIKE *THESE* MELONS?

"So?" he says. "So these aliens *are* rocket scientists, they *are* smarter'n hell. They've just about run out of cover stories, so this time these two came up with a new gimmick. Figure they'll go public in a kind of little, controlled way, and make sure the way they go public, nobody'll believe they are real. Like those controlled burns the Forest Service does. Make a little fire so there's no fuel left there to feed a big fire."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, they found a guy to front for them who'd be the least likely guy to get anyone to believe anything he said and then they talked him into saying it. With one lousy photo for proof. That anybody could of faked up."

"Oh," Marianne says, her voice small. She is beginning to better understand how Bobby's mind works. And the aliens'.

Bobby turns back to his chopping board, slices something, and says, his voice low, "Christ, they even shilled me with that crap of actually

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going down there to Roswell, coming back in a couple of hours — which you could only do if you had some kinda rocket ship — saying it wasn't right for them."

Marianne says, "Had you pretty interested then, when they came back like that, didn't they."

"You got *that* right." Bobby again turns and, smiling ruefully, gestures with his knife. "And they knew just what they were doing. After that Elvis thing, the Yeti, the business with the gold mine shares out on the flats, that drilling for the geothermal project — which by the way I still think would've worked — after all that over the past couple of years, I'm the kiss of death for P-R around here. I know that now, which is why I'm stuck doing prepress for Rotary Club certificates and restaurant menus and furniture ads and selling your occasional siding job... And these two aliens, they're clued in enough, sharp enough, to know it."

"How can they know that much about you? About Granger City?"

"If they can beam stuff up and down, they can beam up what people are talking about. People in bars, the diner, league night out at Alta Lanes, Friday nights at the Elks. I'm not exactly a secret around here." There is a faint note of pride in Bobby's voice.

"Okay," Marianne says, "but why do they want you to do *more* for them now?"

"'Cause after that caption in the paper they figure maybe some people're convinced that they're bogus, that what people saw Monday night was some kinda natural thing, aurora borealis, Air Force screw-up, whatever. But not quite everyone's bought into it. It'll take just a little more. Like I say, those aliens, they're not dumb. They just want a little more insurance."

"Like what?"

"Well let's get real. If they really wanted to convince people they're, you know, *genuine*, they woulda had me arrange a news conference first thing, like I wanted to. Let a whole bunch of people see them, not just good old unreliable Bobby Junco. But they didn't. They set me up with that photo that everybody figures is a phony. And now they're setting me up again."

"By asking you to do a press conference? Ah..." Marianne's pretty face brightens with the sweet realization that she can indeed think just as

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deviously as Bobby after all. Maybe there is hope for their union! "I got it! You arrange it and then they're a no-show, right?"

"Bet the farm, babe. I use what little bit of credibility I got left, round up the newspaper people and maybe Channel 12, the sheriff's office — and then the aliens, they don't appear. Or — if it was me doin' the scam — I'd wire a bunch of cash down to some booking agent in L.A., set it up so that when old dumb Bobby Junco and town bigwigs and the press and maybe the president of Rotary are all gathered together at the high school gym in breathless anticipation, a taxi pulls up and a goddamn midget in a fur coat gets out and says, 'Where's Junco? They tell me he's got another gig for me.'"

"They aren't *that* smart," says Marianne, laughing at the image in spite of herself.

"No, but they're smart enough."

"So what are you going to do? I mean, you could tell them you're going to do the press conference and get a bunch more money up front, and then just not do it. What could they do, sue?"

Bobby shakes his head firmly and turns back to his cooking. "I may be a scam artist, babe, but I'm no crook. Far's I know they haven't done anybody any harm. They want to keep their being here quiet and they pay me to help them do it, then by God that's what I'll do. I just don't want to be *conned* into doing it."

Bobby scrapes chicken chunks into a frying pan and turns back to face Marianne. "What I gotta do, babe," he says, "is figure out how to satisfy the customers and make something good for me — for us — too."

Marianne says, "Hey, hon. We — I — don't need anything more. I mean we — uh — got enough money." The uncustomary plural pronouns please her.

Bobby's voice is barely audible above the sound of sizzle: "It isn't just the bucks, babe."

"You want to, like, get back at them?"

"No way! Gettin' back at someone is something no good scammer ever, *ever* does. It's more..." His voice hangs in a shrug.

"Yes. I understand," Marianne says, her knowledge of the man growing along with the new discoveries about herself. "You want to be the one does the bullshitting."

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In his office the next morning Bobby has yet to solve the puzzle for scamming the alien scammers when the publisher of the *Granger City Post & Review* telephones and hands him a key. "Junco? That photo we bought from you? It went out on the wire and we got a request for it that, you know, we'd like to honor just as a favor to a sister newspaper. How about another fifty bucks for — ah — world rights?"

The crap detector in Bobby's brain sounds its alarm, all neurons go to full battle stations. "A sister newspaper Mr. Bruscoe?"

"Well, a chain, actually."

"Maybe the wire service itself?"

"Yeah, maybe..." There is mixed greed and disdain in Bruscoe's voice. "They tell me... It turns out that some of our people think those goddamn freaks you faked up are — ah — over-the-top — ah — *cute*."

Bobby's imagination is now hypertextual. He sees grand new possibilities that enormously excite him. But he has great experience at poker-facing deals: In a matter-of-fact tone he says, "Well, I had other distribution plans, but I'll tell you what. I'll let you have first North American for — uh — let's say seventy-five percent royalties back to me on the first five grand, eighty-five percent beyond that."

"You're crazy."

"I bet you've got McClatchy and Knight-Ridder and Scripps-Howard."

"Okay, goddamn it. Done."

"And I want credits saying 'Robert Junco Associates' on every print."

"Yeah. Okay."

"And let 'em know I got plenty more. New stuff comin' out every day!"

Elated, Bobby breaks the connection and immediately telephones Marianne at the diner, something he almost never does. "Hey, babe," he says, "I need a favor."

"Sure, hon."

"And I think what I've got goin', well, it ought to get us a lot more than some weekends in Reno. Might get me outta the siding business, you outta that diner."

Marianne again likes the "us" but experience has taught her wariness. "Uh-oh," she says. "What do I have to do?"

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"Can you take off for a little while after the lunch rush? Go by your place and pick up some of those things you got on the shelves in the kitchen, in the living room, those dolls, little bears, animals in bonnets, and bring them over here before two o'clock?"

"You mean my Hummels? Steiffs? The Disney things?"

"Whatever. Anything you figure is, like, 'specially — uh — *cute.*" Bobby can't remember when he last used that word prior to his first description of the aliens the day before. He is uneasy with it.

"Well..." Marianne can't keep the hesitancy out of her voice. And then she thinks, *maybe this is where we put ourselves together.* "...well, sure, hon. Two o'clock? I can make that."

"Good. 'Cause that's when the aliens'll be comin' by again."

MARIANNE ARRIVES with two bulging shopping bags, and as she carefully unwraps and places figurines on every surface not encumbered with the tripods and light stands and photo and video equipment Bobby has spent the morning gathering, Bobby relates his exuberant new syndication ideas.

She thinks she is beginning to understand where he is headed and she is down to her last two favorites — a six inch Disney Pooh and a winsome little Dalmatian puppy — when she hears a liquid pop! and the two aliens appear. The red one glares at her from under frantic eyebrows, says something muffled and irate, and begins to shrink back down to a dot, but the golden one remains, and the red one, after a moment of indecisive pulsing, swells again to reality.

"We relied on your dithcrethion," it says angrily to Bobby, its eyebrows alive. "Who is thith perthon?"

Bobby spreads his hands, palms down, quelling waves. "She's, like, my thignificant other," he says, unaware of the lisp he has briefly contracted. "She's gonna help me set things up so's we can launch the big old press conference you folks said you wanted."

"Your plans are complete?" the gold one says.

"Yes sir! We work it right, we'll have everybody in town in the high school gym. Mayor, city council, county board of supes, sheriff, Rotary president, Channel 12, the reporters from the *P & R*, the guy from FM 97.1.

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Be the biggest show they've had around here I bet since Ronald Reagan stopped by when he was runnin' for Governor."

The two exchange a glance and the squirm of an eyebrow. "Exthellent," says gold fur. "You have done as inthtructed." It deposits another thick wad of bills on Bobby's desk, next to a fuzzy statuette of the Lion King. "We need now only to know the time of our appearanthe."

Bobby studiously ignores the money. "Yeah. Sure. But that kinda depends on how long it'll take me to get all the take here processed." He waves a hand to include the photographic equipment. "I can't get all those busy people together without a lot of, you know, advance promotion. Some kinda teaser."

"More pictures?" red fur says, eyebrows a-flurry.

"We inthithted no more pictures!" gold fur says.

"Gotta have 'em," Bobby says. "For the hype. For the spiel. For the come-on and grabber to get the people into the tent, in a manner of speaking. Trust me on this. I know what I'm doin'. We get a good spread of pictures, you two posed the way my friend Marianne here'll show you, like some of these — uh — statues she's got here, and we'll do SRO at the high school." He pauses, looks expectantly, sinks the barb: "Gotta have a big build-up for your — uh — triumphant appearance, right?"

The two aliens faced each other, their tongues flickering, eyebrows busy. Bobby guesses, if he could read eyebrows and tongues, they'd be saying whatever is alien for "The Higher They Rise the Farther They Fall."

And then, with a lift and drop of what Bobby takes for shoulders and a quick, dismissive wave from an outspread nine-fingered hand, gold fur says, "We acquiethe."

Marianne, fully into her new role as shill, alert to what Bobby is up to, jumps forward with the Lion King figure in her hand, and with a country girl's natural courtesy and deference says to gold fur, "Sir? You want to stand a little like this guy here, you know, your — uh — chest out a little, head up, look over at the camera?"

And as gold fur complies and Bobby begins snapping furiously, Marianne retrieves the Dalmatian and directs red fur, "Ma'am? You want to cock your head a little? Like this little feller here?"

* * *

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After an hour every cassette and reel is filled, and the two aliens, obviously fatigued, wink out in their last flatuous exit.

"So," Marianne says, gathering her Steiffs and Disneys, "now what? We're not gonna go ahead, set up the press conference thing, are we?"

"Nah," Bobby says. "We can deliver what our clients need without goin' through all that, screwing up my reputation worse'n it is now."

Marianne nods. She is now in synch with Bobby, understands him utterly, sees where he's going. "You're turning them into, like, fairy tale creatures, right?"

"Virtual aliens is what I'm thinkin' of callin' 'em. Load all these images into the computer, software I got, I can crank out stuff for months, sell it to some of the syndicates, Mattel, Disney, maybe do a thing with McDonalds, Burger King."

"Ah," Marianne says. "You make some bucks but they get what they want 'cause if they're, like, comic strip characters, nobody'll believe they're real anyway, right?"

"Not too shabby, hey babe?" Bobby is doing a little shuffle, fingers snapping in triumph. "After all, who's gonna try to get a light from Rudolph? Who's gonna see Doc about a rash? Who's gonna really worry about the big bad wolf?"

"I'm with you," says Marianne with equal triumph, grinning as she gathers a pair of CDs from atop Bobby's littered computer and fans them behind her head, like ears. "M-I-C" she chants happily, her other hand describing a slow arc in the air, her life as close to fulfillment as she can imagine. "K-E-Y."

An old valve opens and floods Bobby's mind, the grainy twelve-inch black-and-white on his mother's dressing table in their Vagabond 22 footer somewhere probably in Ohio or Indiana, and he joins Marianne in the chorus.

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A SCIENTIST'S NOTEBOOK

GREGORY BENFORD

THE TEETH OF TIME

SCIENCE fiction echoes science in its passion for vast perspectives of time and space. The time machine and the rocket are our favored icons of interest.

I'm sure that is why science fiction readers so frequently are interested in archaeology, Neanderthals, and the broad panorama of the past. Our fascination runs in both directions of time.

Thanks to science (from physics to archaeology), within the last two centuries our appreciation of the expanses of time, fore and aft of our own precious Now, has expanded enormously.

Two centuries ago, Schliemann had not yet unearthed Troy, and Napoleon's forces were so oblivious to the importance of antiquity that they supposedly shot the nose off the Sphinx for target practice. (Recent study suggests that vandals removed the nose by hand, however.) French Pleistocene cave art was defaced in the 1800s with signatures (thoughtfully dated), in part because the visitors had no idea of the vast age of the paintings.

Advances in radioactive dating and astronomical cosmology have left us standing, as a species, on a vast plain, with perspectives of time stretching from our murky origins to the universe's cosmological destiny. This is a recent condition, quite modern. Ancient societies assumed a comforting stasis, that life and culture would go on for long, essentially infinite eras, sharing a common perspective and even religion. Whipsawed by incessant, accelerating change, the modern mind lives in a fundamental anxiety about the passing of all referents, the loss of meaning.

On the scale of a mere century,

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individually we die. To persist beyond this means to survive through surrogates: family, nation, schools of thought in philosophy, science, or art, religious communities. We have evolved with passionate loyalties to these larger units, probably because they do promise continuity, a consolation for personal mortality.

Over a millennium, neither politics nor technology are sure standards. Only languages, religions, and cultures retain their identity. A thousand years ago, Europeans were crude villagers on the edge of the advanced civilization, the Arabs; but the seeds of Western emergence lay in their culture. Over such spans, only a strategy of what I shall call deep time messages can suffice to propagate anything — an idea, remembrance of a person, cultural works, or even a simple signature.

So far, ten thousand years is the upper limit of conscious, planned deep time communication. Not coincidentally, this is roughly the age of civilization. Little comes to us from beyond this scale except crude signs, notches in stone or antlers, mute stacks of stones, and cave paintings of mysterious intent. Ten millennia ago we lived in hunter-gatherer tribes just hearing about a hot new high-tech approach: agriculture.

Our numbers then took off under that most important of all technological revolutions. Agriculture and fishing appear to have been driven by necessity, as our burgeoning population made old hunter-gatherer modes inadequate. The efficiency of planting seeds and harvesting in turn benefited from the warmer climate coming after the ending of the last ice age. Soon came cities, many novelties, and enough amassed wealth to build more permanent, stony tributes to the powers of the day. Quite quickly, the Egyptians and Chinese began erecting monuments to themselves. The impulse seems buried deep within us.

Such early testaments convey pride, even grandeur, but little more. Many ancient monuments are unmarked and mysterious, like the Sphinx, Stonehenge, and the American mounds. Probably most were not tributes to their builders, but religious sites or mausoleums. Deeper motives may have pervaded societies which we, at our great remove, can only dimly sense.

A leading puzzle of far antiquity is why the ancients often built with great stones, moving burdens intimidating even to modern engi-

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neers. Managing a hundred-ton rock is far more difficult than placing ten ten-ton stones. Yet scattered over the lands of ancient civilizations are countless large stoneworks. At Ba'albek in Lebanon an 800-ton boulder still stands, carefully placed to form a temple wall. The temple's monolithic columns are equally massive. Such feats give clear evidence that the ancients could build on scales comparable to ours, through hard, protracted labor.

Such sites provoke awe, and the sheer numbers of large stoneworks argues that techniques for building them were broadly known and highly developed. Some archaeologists, seemingly innocent of engineering finesse, invoke the "more guys with ropes" explanation to explain how such works came about. More likely, specialized equipment and perhaps traveling artisans helped.

Recently an engineer charged with erecting a monolith of Stonehenge scale devised a counterweight method to tip the 40-ton stone into its support hole. Laying a wooden rail atop the horizontal stone, he put a heavy rock on the rail, near the larger stone's center.

A small team then pushed the rock weight to the end of the monolith, levering it up until it slid into the slot, standing tall. Probably such tricks made ancient works far easier than the "ramps, ropes, and sweat" style often assumed. Further, such feats could give a sense of control over daunting masses that may have been an enduring satisfaction for the entire society. Look what we did, such works proclaimed to generations unborn.

These surmises about ancient motivations seem plausible, but we must remember that they are guesses made through our cultural filters. Some societies (China, Latin America) think in terms of family dynasties, making investments which bear fruit fifty or a hundred years downstream, and passing on homesteads. Ninety-year mortgages are not unknown.

In contrast, our modern attention span is usually quite short. Most industrial societies have an attitude increasingly fixed on the bottom line. Stocks had better show a good quarterly statement, and long-range research is uncommon in industry. In this century, many countries have failed to outlive their citizens. Physicist Hal Lewis wryly notes that "There wouldn't be so many proverbs exhorting us to prepare for the future if it weren't so unnatural." Most people consider

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their own grandchildren the farthest time horizon worth worrying about.

Such views are quite sensible. Why invest thought and effort in such chancy pursuits? Over ten millennia, qualitative changes dominate quantitative ones. Even fervently held values and ideals are totally plastic. Tempocentric notions of "the human condition" do not survive.

Confronted with one of our current skyscraper monoliths of glass and steel, what would a citizen of the year 5000 B.C. think? No doubt these soaring towers would provoke awe. On the other hand, what perspective would a person of the year 5000 A.D. bring? That ours was a great era, perhaps — or merely that for some reason, possibly without noticing, we made our grandest buildings in the same shape as our gravestones?

Indeed, our current concern for the past itself may not be long-lasting. We moderns have watches and clocks to fix us in the immediate moment, ticking off each second. Some of our notorious anxiety probably stems from these ever-present reminders. Paradoxically, we have leisure and inclination to study the past as never before. Both these aspects may change.

Dire circumstances — and nearly all history can be described so, compared with our luxurious present — shorten people's interests and attention spans. In our era, high culture has increasingly reached backward in time, expending great efforts in archaeology and other sciences, almost as if we seek our identity in distant ancestors.

The low culture form of this is nostalgia, and as cultural critic Dean MacCannell notes, nostalgia may come from our notion of progress:

> The progress of modernity... depends on its very sense of instability and inauthenticity. For moderns, reality and authenticity are thought to be elsewhere: in other historical periods and other cultures, in purer, simpler lifestyles. In other words, the concern of moderns for 'naturalness,' their nostalgia and their search for authenticity are not merely casual and somewhat decadent, though harmless, attachments to the souvenirs of destroyed cultures and dead epochs. They are also components of the conquering spirit of modernity — the grounds of its unifying consciousness.

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Associating the past with naturalness is often unconscious, and we shall meet this idea again.

Time itself isn't what it used to be. We moderns labor under a sense of linear time that emerged forcefully after Pope Gregory XIII imposed the Julian calendar on the Catholic world in 1582. Linear calendars had been around from the ancient world, but drifted out of synchronization with the seasons because of bad fits to Earth's actual orbital period.

Astronomical measures of duration embody only one of several concepts of time. Social time might be defined as the cycle of events according to beliefs and customs, subject to language and even fashion. Cultures can conceive time and space less abstractly, as in traditional Chinese concepts, which held that time proceeds by felt cycles, as mirrored in weather and sky. They imagined time to be "round," whereas space was "square."

Further, media reflect emphasis on either time or space. Heavy materials such as thick parchment, clay and stone stress time and endurance. Media emphasizing space-saving are apt to be light and less durable, such as papyrus and paper. These are suited to easy dispersal of information and are prized by administrations, which have short attention spans. We hear down the corridors of history from either the original, durable media, or the flimsy forms which must be continuously renewed, as in the copying of ancient texts by monks in medieval times. Our century's electromagnetic media, from radio to the optical disk, are more perishable still.

In a sense all technologies are attempts to contest the ordinations of time. Agriculture tries to make crops grow to order, medicine delays the onslaughts of age and death, transportation moves us faster, communication media strive for speed and preservation of information. There is a touch of eternity in the photograph, a technology for preserving the moment that would have astonished the ancients.

Beginning in the nineteenth century, critics sought to undermine the very notion of timelessness. They held that monuments mediate memory and insist that remembrance remains inert, moored in the landscape, ignoring the essential mutability of all cultural works.

Nietzsche disdained any vision of history that pretended to permanence. Lewis Mumford pronounced "monumentalism" dead since it

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clashed with his sense of the fluidity of the modern. "If it is a monument, it is not modern, and if it is modern, it cannot be a monument." Lacking the quality of renewal, monuments gave "a false sense of continuity." He saw this as essentially a moral failing, since by not putting their faith in renewal, out of vanity the powerful then mummified the moment into a petrified immortality. "They write their boasts upon tombstones, they incorporate their deeds in obelisks; they place their hopes of remembrance in solid stones joined to other solid stones, dedicated to their subjects or their heirs forever, forgetful of the fact that stones that are deserted by the living are even more helpless than life that remains unprotected and preserved by stones."

Even quite recently, some find memorials destructive. Pierre Nora warns, "Memory has been wholly absorbed by its meticulous reconstruction." As James Young remarks, "To the extent that we encourage monuments to do our memory-work for us, we become that much more forgetful."

These views stem from short horizons. "Memory-work" necessarily transforms and ebbs as centuries roll on. Legends warp. To be sure, in broad outline, folk memory is surprisingly long-lived. Modern Australian aborigines recall landmarks that were flooded since the last ice age, 8000 years ago; divers verified their existence. But much of this information is cloudy; to what does the mythical beast they call the "bunyip" correspond?

The modernist fear of rigidity already seems a bit antique. Already modernism has entertained newer ideas, including "postmodernism," which seeks to undermine the meaning of texts. (This seems a passing fashion, more a mistaking of momentary cultural exhaustion for a fresh, innovative view.) It seems likely that anti-monumental thinking is fading faster than will messages which attempt to speak across gaps of language, culture and intention.

Our own individual pasts get filtered by later experiences of time's flow. It is commonplace to note that the years flicker by faster as we age. Certainly a new year can have less impact when we have many more stacked behind us. I suspect the sameness of the later years also alters our reading of them. We settle into habits and the days have fewer distinctions to mark their passing. We slide forward on skids greased by routine.

Little wonder, then, that we

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have a keener sense of the endless centuries behind us as our expected lifetimes approach a century. To a baby, a year is like a lifetime because it is his lifetime, so far. By age ten, clocks tick on at an apparent rate ten times faster than the baby's sense; the next year is only a ten percent increase in his store of years. At fifty, time ticks on five times faster still. At a hundred, the differential rate is a hundred times the baby's.

Some poets have found this a blessing, as in Thomas Campbell's "The River of Life":

Heaven gives our years of fading strength
Indemnifying fleetness;
And those of youth, a seeming length,
Proportion'd to their sweetness.

Imagine living to a thousand; then a year would have the impact of a few hours in a baby's life. To such a being, deep time is the proper scale.

In thinking of far antiquity, we cannot help but invoke our current assumptions. In the 1990s, historical analysis often assesses our past using current moral or ethical standards, a critical posture doomed to obsolescence as tastes change. Something broader and less bound up in the moment is needed.

Culture shapes our vision of the past, even grossly falsifying it. As well, memory is notoriously unreliable. Individual recollections of the past are easily and quickly shaped by others and after a while need have little bearing on the once lived events. Consider how many believe one or more of the conspiracy theories about the Kennedy assassination.

Deep time messages seek to counter this, consciously or not. We are often unaware of how antiquity influences us, for as we shall see, some signals across the abyss of deep time we do not even recognize as artificial.

Throughout history, most people — as opposed to some institutions — have never given thought to the morrow beyond their own grandchildren. We moderns have taken this to new heights. Yet attempts to affect distant generations appeared in early civilizations. As we shall see, we live in a world subtly altered by changes wrought before historical recording began.

Assurbanipal, king of Babylonia, Assyria, and Egypt in the 7th century B.C., amassed a vast library of stone tablets laboriously incised with the knowledge of the day. Today these comprise a useful

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trove for scholars. Assurbanipal was following the lead of his father, Esarhaddon, who buried cuneiform inscriptions in the foundation stones of monuments and buildings.

They obeyed an impulse common to virtually all cultures. Typically the practice springs from a class that feels it has accomplished much and has the resources to leave durable messages announcing this. The universality of this impulse is fundamentally positive and far-seeing, time-binding us with generations before and after our brief moment in the sun. Practiced over millennia but seldom noticed in the everyday rhythms of our lives, the desire to pass on messages gives us perspectives on the import of our own actions, seen against the long odyssey of our species.

There seems to us something fitting, elegant and deeply human in such gestures reaching across the abyss of time, a humbling acknowledgment that posterity is quite real and important to us. Yet such acceptance is oddly exalting, too.

Such sentiments readily emerge from contact with ancient monuments. More complex and ambiguous feelings come in the face of the oldest concerted attempts to leave creative records, the cave markings found principally in Europe.

Were the cave painters hoping to send some record of themselves down through deep time? As usual, we can only speculate; paintings seldom announce their intentions.

Many have sensed that the cave art did contain messages, but increasingly, after decades of warring theories, experts believe that we cannot understand the messages clearly because they are not aimed at us.

Most commonly, anthropologists believe the paintings had some magical purpose. Did showing spears or harpoons penetrating game ensure a good hunt? But such weapons appear seldom. There are even counter-examples, such as a scene from the "Dead Man's Shaft" in the famous Lascaux cave. A realistically pictured bison is goring a man, who is childishly drawn. The bison is also wounded, impaled by a spear, its intestines protruding. Was this detail considered important enough to chronicle with care? Then why is the man crudely done?

Others believe that the paintings are art for art's sake, period. Since some anthropologists believe these people had plenty to eat and leisure time, this seems plausible. Though the work ranges from bare, artless graffiti to stunning depictions,

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they all share a precision of observation. These artists knew animal behavior and fauna down to small details, and rendered them exquisitely.

This suggests that many paintings may have aided instruction of the young. Gathered safely inside, by fireglow young boys and girls could learn how animals gave away their movements and moods and methods. Some paintings begin near cave entrances and then fade toward the sunlight, erased by time, suggesting that they continued outside. Given the ease and pleasures of working outside, we can guess that Ice Age humanity may have left innumerable works on rocks, trees and boulders, of which a tiny fraction have come down to us.

Crucially, we cannot know if they had any sense of long time scales, or any urge to leave their mark for the shadowy far future. But the impact of their message, whether intended for their children or as art for art's sake, shines through. These very ambiguities make us study their works all the more.

Time breeds mystery, no less than the vastness of space. My next column shall explore how little we learn from even the best preserved monuments, and why.

Portions of this appear in Dr. Benford's new book, *Deep Time*.

Comments and objections to this column are welcome. Please send them to Gregory Benford, Physics Department, Univ. Calif., Irvine, CA 92717. Email: gbenford@uci.edu

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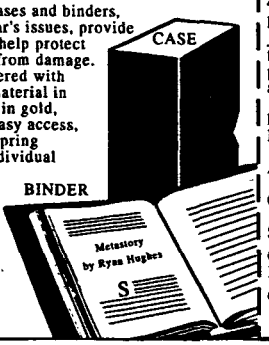

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Those of you who are new to this publication might know Ms. Rusch's name from her novels in "The Fey" series, the most recent of which, Victory, *appeared a few months ago. (You folks can now look forward to the "Black Throne" series, which will be set on the same world.) Or you might recognize her byline from the short stories of hers that have appeared recently in anthologies like* First Lady Murders *and* Black Cats and Broken Mirrors. *But you really ought to be aware that Ms. Rusch was editor of this magazine for six years, during which time she won one Hugo Award and was nominated for a host of other honors. She gave up this cushy job two years ago to spend more time writing. We think this dark and moody fantasy will help you see why she made that difficult choice.*

The Women of Whale Rock

By Kristine Kathryn Rusch

THE GULLS SWARMED OVER the Sandcastle Hotel. Whipping and diving and cawing to their fellows, they looked like something out of Daphne du Maurier's "The Birds," a novelette more sinister and terrifying than anything Hitchcock ever produced.

Charles watched from his deck. The morning breeze was harsh and smelled of salt. He still wore his silk pajamas. Rain the night before had left the wood damp and cold. His ancient tattered slippers, the ones Grace had given him before she died, were getting wet.

Grace and gulls. He closed his eyes, knowing what the night would bring. Then he shook off the thought, hoping, this time, he would have the resolve to let it end.

Charles opened his eyes and rested his hands on the damp rail. The swarming had grown worse. Nearly a hundred birds flocked to that tiny section of beach.

There was no way he would go down there.

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At least, not alone.

He sighed, went inside, and called Dan Retsler.

Dan Retsler was scanning the *Oregonian* as he stood near the window of the police station. The window overlooked Highway 101, the main thoroughfare down the Oregon Coast. Every morning, Retsler scanned the newspaper and the street simultaneously. In the summer, he would be the primary witness to petty thefts, tourists running red lights, and the occasional fender-bender.

His police department had a staff of three, not counting the dispatcher. He put two officers on at night. During the day, he and a lone officer could handle the problems with the help of the dispatcher. The dispatcher, one Miss Lucy Wexel, had been with the department since Retsler was a teenage hoodlum at Taft High School. He doubted she was any different when she was hired than she was now. She chewed gum, talked tough, and believed her work safeguarded the mean streets of Whale Rock for yet another day.

The phone rang and she answered. Then she stabbed the hold button with a stubby finger, and paused to take a draw from her cigarette before facing him. Smoke curled around her face, making her look like someone's kindly grandmother instead of the hardest woman he had ever known.

"Charles Bishop," she said, and from her tone Retsler knew what the call was about.

He wound around the gun-metal desks to the small cubicle he called an office. Then he grabbed the receiver on the ancient black phone, and punched line one.

"Gulls?" he asked.

"Got another report, huh?" Bishop sounded vaguely relieved, as if a burden were being lifted from him.

"No," Retsler said. "Lucky guess."

He rubbed his nose with his thumb and forefinger, trying to ease a building headache. He knew the drill: first the gulls, then the body pecked beyond recognition, and finally the county coroner, who would claim death by drowning and deny everything else.

"Where should I meet you?" Bishop asked.

"At the turnout," Retsler said. He'd long ago stopped demanding that

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Bishop stay home. Bishop would do as he pleased. For some reason, he always chose to join Retsler in shooing the gulls away.

And then holding watch over the ruined mass of flesh until the coroner arrived to lie to them again.

The first one showed up just after Bishop arrived in town. He had called Retsler and begun their tradition. A young woman, somewhere between sixteen and twenty-six (judging by the age and condition of her remaining internal organs), washed up on the beach. The gulls swarmed. The tourists were terrified, and someone started a rumor that she had jumped from the Sandcastle's roof, desolate about a love affair gone bad.

Only no one knew her, and no one was reported missing.

Definitely not a suicide, the coroner, Hamilton Denne, had said as he knelt gingerly beside the body, getting his expensive gray slacks covered with sand. But he couldn't rule out death by drowning. He couldn't confirm it either since her lungs were missing, her chest cavity ravaged, and her face gone.

He could say for certain that she had died, and that she had spent a long time in the water.

He would say nothing more. Not even when Retsler asked about her dental records. Her lower jaw remained intact, and some of her teeth had fillings. Not enough to identify her, but enough to cause Bishop consternation. He was a newly retired dentist, and he said, with a single glance, that no one used that odd mixture of iron and silver fillings anymore. No one had since the thirties.

A week later, a second body turned up. A boy, between ten and eighteen, dead against the sea wall.

Then the stories emerged, stories about why the Sandcastle had closed in the early seventies. Guests reported strangers in their rooms, a strange briny smell in the hallway, and frightening attacks in the middle of the night. Soon the hotel stood empty, even in the busy summer. The owners tried to sell the hotel, failed, and closed the doors. Lucy heard that they had discovered another body inside the day they boarded it up, but no one had any record of it.

And so the curse of the Sandcastle began.

But locals did not discuss it, except for Retsler and Bishop. Retsler

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because he had to deal with the bodies, and Bishop because of guilt.

Because of his wife.

Charles stood in the gravel turnout near the beach access. He wore his waterproof jacket and a pair of knitted gloves, the last pair Grace had made for him. The other gloves were in his bedroom closet, frayed reminders of her and the lack of her. He had his back to the path, hands shoved in his pockets, the wind off the ocean wiping his remaining hair into his face. The traffic on 101 was Saturday heavy, but so far no one had stopped to see what was drawing the gulls.

They were still diving for the body. Their caws sounded like screams up close, a woman's scream, desperate and alone.

He shivered in spite of himself.

At last Retsler's blue sedan pulled into the turnout, spraying gravel like shotgun pellets. Dan Retsler was forty, but drove as if he were eighteen and immortal. Charles often wondered how Retsler managed to pick up speeders without feeling like a hypocrite.

Retsler got out, wearing his green cop's rain slicker and waders. In his right hand, he clutched the bullhorn. In his left, a rifle. He handed Charles the bullhorn, then dug in the car a moment longer, emerging with a bag of popcorn big enough to feed a family of five.

"Where's Eddie?" Charles asked.

"The Billows. He knows what to do."

They all did. They had done it often enough.

Charles hefted the bullhorn, turned it on its side, made sure the speaker was off, and turned the control to "siren." Retsler loaded his rifle, but kept the safety on. The bag of popcorn leaned against his leg like a small child.

"Ready?" he asked.

Charles nodded. They turned together and stared at the gulls, circling and crying, white perfection against an azure sky. The ocean smelled strongly of brine, but the wind had died.

Retsler led the way across the narrow footpath and down the concrete steps. The previous night's storm had churned up the beach, leaving piles of sea-blackened driftwood and gifts of garbage from the sea-bottom. The tide was out, but the sand was still wet, attesting to the power of the storm.

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Sea foam dried in a reflective green pattern across the flat part of the beach.

No one walked here except summer people. Locals avoided this stretch of beach, making excuses about the rocks, the driftwood, the soft sand. Sometimes Charles walked down the steps, sitting on the bottom one and staring at the remains of Whale Rock, the one that gave the town its name. It no longer looked like a whale as it had at the turn of the century; now it looked like a parking lot in the middle of the sea. Even the strength of rock succumbed to the power of the ocean.

The gulls formed a sea of their own near the Sandcastle's deteriorating wall. The sight was formidable, not frightening, something none of the stories about birds — not even Du Maurier's classic — managed to capture. Charles stood on a flat rock protruding from the sand and clutched the bullhorn. Retsler stood beside him, popcorn in one hand, rifle in the other.

"Here goes nothing," Charles said. He picked up the bullhorn and flicked it on. The siren wailed like amplified feedback. He cringed, wishing he had remembered ear plugs. Retsler hadn't moved. He stared intently at the gulls.

They took a few hesitant steps, then the first flew into the sky, followed by another, then another, until the entire flock was airborne. They soared, their screeches hidden by the bullhorn's wail.

This was where Eddie came in. He was supposed to toss bread from the Billows's deck. Sometimes he caught the birds' attention; sometimes he didn't.

This time he did. They flew in ever widening circles north, crying their protest at the siren, and communicating the message to other gulls about food ahead. They left this isolated section of beach torn up and covered with droppings, feathers, bits of food.

And the body, one leg bent as if the person were just resting on its back, watching the clouds.

Neither Charles nor Retsler left the rock. They had done that too early once, and he still had nightmares about it.

Of all the creatures on God's earth, birds seemed to be the only ones without souls.

Finally the last gull disappeared behind the bluff that hid the Billows.

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Charles shut off the bullhorn. The sound stopped, but his ears ached, and would, probably, until the following day. But if things ran true to form, he wouldn't notice.

He shuddered, wished, just once, that this would all end.

Then Retsler inclined his head toward the body, and Charles nodded. Together they stepped off the rock and headed down the beach.

RETSLER CLUTCHED the bag tightly. The rifle was heavy in his right hand. He hoped he wouldn't have to use either. The last time had convinced him that the gulls weren't afraid of the gun, and the time before that he discovered that a single bag of popcorn barely gave him time enough to escape. The extra large bag might give them a few extra seconds, which they would need. Bishop didn't run well anymore. Retsler always worried about bringing him to the beach.

But if they didn't go together, Bishop might have come alone, a risk that Retsler just couldn't take.

The fetid odor of decaying flesh mixed with the scent of salt. This one had been out here longer than the others. Odd that the gulls would prey on it now.

He led the way across the rocks and onto the soft sand. The body was shoved against the sea wall like all the others, one leg bent in a V, arms outflung above the head. Retsler knew without looking that the eyes would be gone. The gulls always took those first, some kind of avian delicacy, followed by the tongue if they could get it, and then they would peck their way into the stomach. He had seen it more than once, not just here, but on bodies washed up all over the beach.

Retsler followed the three-pronged bird prints to the corpse's side. He set down the popcorn, reached in his pocket for the Vicks, and smeared some inside his nose. Without looking, he handed the bottle over his shoulder to Bishop. No one needed to smell this, not even for a moment.

Bishop took the bottle but stayed back. Retsler crouched near the body, tried to see what it had been through the mess the gulls had made.

Male, older, judging by the strands of gray mixed with the wet curls on top of the head, corpse white and bloated. It had been in the water a long, long time. Maybe it wasn't one of the bodies that came to this beach.

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Maybe it was a true death by drowning, not some mystery killing offshore.

Then he saw what he hoped he wouldn't; the remains of a vest with a gold watch still tucked inside, pants with buttons, not zippers, and on the bent leg, garters to hold up the socks. Old man clothing pre-1950.

He glanced at Bishop, who pointed at the open mouth. Tobacco-stained teeth, cracked, crooked, and broken. No modern dentist would allow such a travesty.

Bishop set down the bullhorn. "I'll call the coroner," he said.

That night, they got drunk. Bishop tried to beg off, but Retsler, afraid he'd go home and brood, convinced him to brood in public. They went to the False Colors, a local bar that had once started as a tourist attraction. But the pirate theme seemed more foreboding than touristy, and tourists usually spent an uncomfortable hour before sliding their way out the door. Retsler usually liked the black and white skull-and-crossbones hanging over the door, the uneven wooden floor, the skulls lining the fireplace mantel, the sound of sea chanties sung with unusual heartiness through the stereo speakers.

Usually. On this night it seemed a bit much.

But Lucy had picked the place. She was drinking whiskey and smoking a cigar, her unpainted chair tilted back against the stones in the fireplace. Eddie was nursing his third beer, and Bishop was downing gin and tonics as if he actually liked the stuff. Retsler had just bummed one of Lucy's cigars when the coroner walked in.

Hamilton Denne never set foot in a bar. He occasionally frequented establishments where fine liquor was served. He lived in Glen Ellyn Cove, a gated community for Whale Rock's considerable wealthy population. The Cove had a five-star restaurant near its gate, a private club upstairs, and an atmosphere as snooty as Denne's name. Most of Denne's neighbors had no idea what he did for a living. If they asked, he always told them that he was a medical examiner. He worked hard to keep his name out of the papers, easy to do since the coroner's position in Seavy County was an appointed, not an elected, position. If it was necessary to mention the coroner at all, the paper usually did it by title, not by name. No sense in offending the Dennes of Glen Ellyn Cove.

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Denne ordered a Glenlivet and was tersely informed he would get Chivas or the bar scotch or no scotch at all. He settled for the Chivas, and carried it to the table himself.

Retsler said nothing. He was on his second local stout and his judgment was impaired, but not that impaired. Eddie peered over his long-neck as if he didn't believe what he saw. Bishop slid his gin and tonic toward the center of the table, unfinished. Lucy set her chair down on all four legs, leaned forward, and said, "Want a cigar, Your Highness?"

"No, thanks," Denne said, and pulled out a silver cigarette case engraved with his initials, no doubt a gift from his obscenely wealthy wife. Being the coroner, Retsler believed, was Denne's secret rebellion against that elegant woman whose bank account had bought Denne all the good things in life. Denne removed a cigarette, tapped the end, then twirled it in his long, clean fingers.

He looked at all of them as if he saw what their breathalyzer results would be. Then he put the cigarette in his mouth, lit it with a matching silver lighter, and took a long drag. "I wasn't here," he said, smoke billowing out with each word. "Not now, not ever. You ever claim I was or breathe a word about what I'm about to say, I'll deny it. Is that clear?"

Lucy tilted her chair back. Bishop stared blearily at the table. Eddie lifted his long-neck in mock toast, then cradled it against his chest.

"I'm sure no one would believe us anyway," Retsler said.

"I'm sure you're right." Denne took another drag, the gesture curiously defiant, like a teenage boy smoking in front of his parents. "Some coroners aren't very thorough, you know."

Retsler knew. He and Denne had come on at the same time and had to clean up similar messes. They had commiserated about it more than once over lunch — in North County, away from Denne's snobby friends.

"But for those who are, the human cadaver is a wealth of information."

"So you going to dick with us or tell us what you found?" Eddie said.

Retsler shushed him. He knew Denne. Denne would talk in his own time.

"Take, for instance, someone who drowned. Easy call, from the general condition of the body to water in the lungs. Most coroners would leave it there. Some would do a routine check for other fluids, and some would test the water in the lungs."

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Bishop had picked up his drink. He clutched it in one hand, knuckles white.

"If the water's salt, possible accidental death by drowning. But if the water's fresh — "

"He had his lungs?" Retsler asked.

"Regrettably no," Denne said. "And if he had, it wouldn't have mattered. The fish had gotten to him before the gulls."

"So he'd been there a long time?" Bishop asked.

Denne didn't answer. He took a sip of the scotch, winced, and pushed the glass aside. "In 1936, a yacht went down near the Rock."

"The *Lady June*," Lucy said. "Quite a scandal."'

Retsler peered at her, doing a slow calculation in his head. She had been six at the time. It was hard to imagine her as a six-year-old.

"Right," Denne said. "You know about it?"

"They don't," Lucy said.

Denne nodded, resumed as if he hadn't been interrupted at all. "It had been a clear night. She'd gone out of the bay with a complement of fifty, all there to celebrate the engagement of June Brooks to Lester Dyston. June, the darling daughter of J. William Brooks of the Portland Brookses — "

"The lumber baron's family," Lucy added helpfully.

" — was eighteen and quite a catch. Dyston was a Midwestern transplant who held some sort of managerial position at Brooks Lumber. Thirty of Portland's best families were invited to the celebration. Many declined because the party was being held in Whale Rock in May, and most weren't ready to open their beach houses just yet."

"Lucky most of them did, too," Lucy said, "or it would have been Portland's version of the *Titanic*."

This time, Denne glared at her. She shrugged, stuck the cigar back in her mouth, and crossed her arms, as if she thought he'd get the story all wrong.

"The ship went down in the middle of a storm. Only Dyston survived. He claimed he was carried to shore by mermaids." Denne glanced at Lucy, who didn't even blink.

"And people believed him?" Eddie said.

Denne smiled. "Maybe not about the mermaids. But he was young, he was strong, and he was a good swimmer. Whale Rock isn't so very far away when the tide is out."

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"So what does this have to with our bodies?" Bishop asked.

"A couple of things." Denne stubbed out his half-finished cigarette, grabbed his glass, and downed the scotch like water. The taste apparently didn't matter to him anymore. "First, the Sandcastle was built from the old Brooks mansion. Second, neither the yacht nor the bodies were ever recovered, and third, we have in the cooler the body of J. William himself."

Retsler felt a lightness in his stomach that had nothing to do with the beer. "You're sure?"

"As sure as I'll ever be," Denne said. "This one came complete with identification. The watch was engraved, so was his wedding ring."

"That's not enough," Retsler said.

"You're right. J. William's habits were legendary, from his love of a good cigar to his adoration of spicy food. He nearly lost his right leg in World War One, and from then on, that leg was shorter than the other. His ulcer operation made medical history at the time."

"You studied a lot about this man," Retsler said.

"I had cause." Denne let the words hang, but Retsler knew why. The bodies had been bothering Denne too, only he had some idea where they had come from. He had been waiting for definitive proof. And apparently he had found it.

"What convinced you this was Brooks?" Bishop asked.

"The leg might have done it," Denne said. "But it was the ulcer scar. The surgeon stitched the stomach closed, then stitched the skin incision separately. He removed the external stitches but not the internal ones. That was bad enough, but I could have chalked it up to carelessness. No. But that wasn't it. It was the stitches themselves. No one uses wire for sutures these days. No one has for a long, long time."

"You're saying all the bodies came from that ship?" Bishop asked.

Denne nodded.

"So what, they all return on the anniversary of the sinking?" Eddie asked.

"Nothing as romantic as all that," Denne said. "The storm last night stirred the ocean. That ship must have gone down deep, some place cold enough to keep bodies from decaying, to keep clothing intact."

"And the ocean spits them back up, in the same place?" Eddie asked. "I don't think so."

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"Oh, I do," Denne said. "A certain kind of tide must bring them out of that place. Something that happens during storms, maybe, or the storms' interaction with what's left of the Rock. Every now and then the conditions are right, and the sea returns a body."

"I suppose you believe in mermaids too," Bishop said. His words were slightly slurred, his tone odd, almost hopeful.

Denne shook his head. "I agree with the local police chief. Dyston sabotaged the yacht, killing everyone on board except himself."

"How would the chief know that?" Retsler asked.

"Because the lifeboat made it to shore, rope cut, boat empty. Because all the lifesavers made it too, also empty. Because a passing fishing boat saw the boy jump over the side while the party was in full swing. It looked to them like the yacht was in trouble but no one seemed to be noticing."

"Little vague, I think," Retsler said.

"No more vague than mermaids," Denne said.

"You've been holding out on me," Retsler said.

"Maybe." Denne stood, and put a twenty on the table. "Or maybe I made this up to justify my presence in this sleazy little bar. Goodnight all."

He shoved his hands in his pockets and picked his way carefully around the wooden tables. None of the other patrons even seemed to notice him.

"He couldn't have made it all up," Eddie said, looking at Lucy. "You knew about it."

Lucy nodded. "My mom kept all the clippings."

"So why'd he kill them?" Eddie asked.

"Because he was a drifter," she said. "Because he was marrying June for her money."

"Seems to me you don't kill the golden goose," Retsler said.

"You do when Daddy reveals your secrets at what should have been your night of triumph, when he humiliates you in front of what must have seemed like the whole world."

Retsler shook his head. "Sounds to me more like June had cause to kill Dyston."

Lucy grinned. "Don't look at me. I'm just telling you what the papers

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said. Me, I've always believed in the mermaids."

"They're not saints either," Bishop said, and passed out.

CHARLES WOKE UP in his own bed, cold and fully clothed. His mouth tasted of cotton, and his head ached. He had gotten drunk, and he had vowed not to. The sound of running water in the master bath made him sit up, hand to head, trying not to moan. At first he thought the toilet was running, but the sound was too bathtub-like, too full.

Someone else was in the house. Visions of Daryl Hannah in *Splash*, himself as an aging Tom Hanks, made him realize that he was watching too many videos, substituting books and movies for human companionship.

His life had enough drama.

Of course someone else was in the house. Someone had brought him home.

Besides, it couldn't be mermaids. They rarely came into his house. He only knew of them doing so once. The night Grace died.

Still, as he stumbled to the bathroom, he couldn't shake the image of them as he last saw them, looking not lanky and graceful, not the semi-naked beauties of Disney animation or with the erotic suggestiveness of Yeats. Instead they reminded him of ancient figureheads carved by inexpert sailors, women with eyes that were flat, features rough-hewn, hair plastered to misshapen heads. Their land legs had feet as big as flippers. The mermaids walked as if they were in pain — Hans Christian Andersen had gotten that much right — but that could have been as easily caused by the huge feet as "daggers through the flesh."

So when he entered the bathroom, he was startled to find it empty. The tub was dry, and the toilet wasn't running at all. Not even the faucet in the sink was dripping. But he hadn't dreamed the sound. It continued in the plumbing like a garrulous ghost.

He went down the stairs to the guest bathroom and found it empty too. The kitchen was as spotless as he had left it, and the washer was off. No water running anywhere in the house.

Then he looked outside. Down the hill from him, the sea glowed with its strange luminosity. A few clouds blew across the moon, but there was no rain.

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No water anywhere.
Except in his imagination.
With the mermaids.

Not even Dan Retsler had enough guts to go to the Sandcastle at night. But after he dropped off Bishop — fireman-carried him, actually, upstairs and into bed — he stopped at the bottom of Bishop's hill and stared at the hotel.

The moon was full and the ocean shone, as it always did at night, as if someone had lit it up from underneath. The natural light, combined with the street lights, made the west side of Highway 101 as bright as dawn, when the shadows were just receding from the land, replaced by the whitewash of early morning.

The Sandcastle didn't look like a mansion. But it didn't look like a hotel, either. It was three stories high, rectangular, and had doors every ten feet that faced the highway. The balconies were made of metal, which were beginning to look red from rust. The rest of the building was a bright peeling blue. Someone had added fake turrets on either side — if he hadn't known better, he would have guessed they were cardboard— and the word "Sandcastle" was painted across one of them in white gothic script.

What kind of man would build a mansion like that? What kind of heirs would sell it? Beachfront property was rare on the Oregon Coast, rare and expensive, while the rest of the land was cheap. He couldn't imagine what that land would have gone for in 1936, or why, despite the bodies, it still hadn't sold in 1997.

The turrets, he imagined, were an addition, as were the balconies and the doors, added in the tourist-boom of the 1950s. He couldn't, for the life of him, see the original shape of the building, how all the pieces had once fit together into an elegant whole.

He wasn't certain why that was important, but he would wager Denne had an idea. Denne, with his stories about tides and deep cold and bodies remaining preserved for sixty years. Denne, who clearly believed none of it.

Laughter broke his reverie. Women's laughter. Three women surrounded his car. Tall women, with strawlike hair, and the ugliest faces he had ever seen. They had bulging eyes, naturally pursed lips, and nearly flat

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noses. *Fish women,* he thought, and shuddered. He'd had too much to drink. They leaned on his hood, peered into his windshield and laughed at him. Their gray-green eyes were the color of the sea on stormy mornings, their skin the same sallow bloodless white of the corpses he'd found on the beach.

"Hey!" he shouted. "Hey, get away from the car!"

But they didn't. They moved closer, like people peering into a fish tank. He slapped at the windshield, and when they still didn't move, he punched the horn, quick and loud.

The women jumped away, startled. The one on the hood rolled off, unable to catch herself. Her friends disappeared in front of the car, then reappeared in his headlights clutching her and staring at him as if he were more than a curiosity, as if he were a threat.

He tapped the horn one more time, and they backed away from the front of the car. He turned north on 101, hands shaking, mouth dry. It wasn't until he had reached the movie theater a mile away that the realization hit him.

The women hadn't just been ugly.

They had also been naked.

CHARLES WOKE after a restless night's sleep, filled with dreams of running water and bloated, decaying bodies. His head pounded, and his stomach churned. The sour taste of gin and tonics coated his tongue. He sat up, one hand to his head, wondering why he'd let Retsler talk him into going to the False Colors. He knew better than to drink. When he drank, he forgot, and when he forgot...

He threw the covers back and stood up, startled at the sudden chill on his legs. His silk pajama bottoms were missing. His upper thighs were coated with sand, and a strand of seaweed was wrapped around his left knee. He got out of bed quickly, his heart pounding. Maybe he and Retsler had gone down to the beach after they left the bar. Maybe he had put on his pajama top and had forgotten his bottoms. Maybe, but not likely.

The house smelled of brine.

And he thought of Grace, feeling that same sickly stab of guilt he

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always felt when he thought of her. She had remained trim into her mid-fifties. Silver hair capping her well-shaped head. Every morning she went down to the beach, the entire beach, legends be damned.

Every morning.

Including the last.

He closed his eyes and tilted his head back, restraining an anguish so deep he had no words for it. He should have known. He should have known yesterday when the body appeared on the beach. He should have known he would awaken like this.

He had known, and he had ignored it, preferring the company of friends to the silence of the house. Knowing that only drink would get rid of the images in his mind.

Maybe he had allowed himself to get drunk. Because he didn't have the willpower to say no.

"I'm sorry, Grace," he whispered. "Sorry for everything."

But sorry would never ever be enough.

"Okay," Lucy said. "This is what I got."

She dumped three scrapbooks with black construction paper and cardboard covers on Retsler's desk. The smell of stale cigar smoke and mildew rose from them. He pushed his copy of the *Oregonian* aside. No newspaper this morning, no surveying the street. These deaths were bothering him, Denne's comments bothering him even more.

And the three women from the night before, they too had haunted him during his pitifully short sleep. He had awakened annoyed, his body aching, as though he had been interrupted in the middle of an erotic dream. Only he hadn't found the women attractive, nor the dream in the least way sexual.

"Dan," Lucy said. "You gonna look or should I take these away?"

Her voice snapped him out of his reverie. He wasn't a teenager anymore. He really needed a full night's sleep.

"No," he said. "No, I'm going to look." He smiled at her, and took the notebooks. He was wrong about the material on the covers. It wasn't a cardboard and construction paper combination but something that felt like both of them and neither at the same time. The scrapbooks were bound with a thick gold string.

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"Well, don't rip nothing," Lucy said. She picked up his newspaper and went back to her desk.

He opened the first notebook carefully. The front page of the local weekly, the *News Guard*, from 1936 flapped at him. The paper was brittle and was held in place by tape so yellow it nearly looked brown. Beneath the page, in small black script, someone had written: *Accident at Whale Rock.*

At first, he didn't read the articles. He merely scanned them, thumbing his way through the entire notebook. When he reached the end, he realized that this was more than a curiosity to Lucy. She had been six when the accident happened. Someone else had kept the notebooks and passed them on to Lucy in later years.

He almost asked her whose notebooks they had been. Almost. He wasn't ready to hear. He needed to study the clippings first.

The first notebook held only clippings from the *News Guard.* The second notebook held clippings from papers as diverse as *The Oregonian* and *The New York Times.* The death of J. William and his friends sent a ripple through the national financial community, a ripple that became evident almost immediately. J. William was an old-time fiscal conservative, with ties all over the Northwest. He had fought the bids for dams on the Columbia. He had fought the arrival of federal money into Oregon. He had lost the battles twice, but during the spring of 1936, he was working against Roosevelt, against the New Dealers, and against the flow of federal money. If he hadn't died, if he hadn't lost, the Pacific Northwest would have looked completely different. No public funds would have supported the Bonneville Power Administration. No defense contracts would have flowed to Seattle.

The money would have stayed with J. William Brooks and his friends.

The national papers called the destruction of the yacht murder. And some papers claimed that Lester Dyston was part of a larger conspiracy. The conspiracy of the New Dealers to rid themselves of the conservative Northwest factions, the friends of J. William Brook. The papers claimed the trial, its mockery of justice, and its result proved the conspiracy, but nothing was ever done about it.

None of those facts made it to the *News Guard.* The local paper focused solely on the issue of mermaids.

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* * *

Charles took a long hot shower. Steam rose around him as he washed off the sand. He had hidden the seaweed in toilet paper and flushed it, never wanting to look at it again.

Then, when he was done, he wrapped himself in a big fluffy towel and stepped out of the stall, pausing for a moment at the tiny bathroom window with its view of the sea.

The morning ocean was multicolored: the front section a steely blue, the middle a solid gray, and the section near the horizon golden where the sun broke through the clouds. Gulls sat on the roof of the Sandcastle as they always did, but none dove, none circled, none flocked.

He swallowed and leaned his head against the cool glass, cursing the day he had bought the house. The day after he and Grace had moved in, they had showered together, then stood before this window, marveling at their luck. That afternoon, they had walked to the beach and he had found a bottle with a half torn label that read Château Lafite-Rothschild 1924, covered with seaweed and still chilled from its days in the ocean. Pulling it out of the sand had reminded him, even then, of that scene in *Notorious* where Ingrid Bergman and Cary Grant watched as Claude Rains poured uranium dust from a wine bottle. Grace had wanted to leave the bottle, but Charles had not. He had taken it, thanked the ocean for her gift, and brought it to the house. They had wine with their fresh halibut dinner that night. Grace had taken one sip and declared the wine vinegar, but he believed her palate was off. It was, quite simply, the best wine he had ever tasted, and he drank the entire bottle himself.

That night, after Grace fell asleep, he had wandered drunkenly down to the beach. He had later told her he had blundered into the surf, and she had scolded him for his carelessness, made him promise to never do so again, afraid he would die from exposure or drowning or his own drunken stupidity.

But he had lied to her. He had not touched the water. His memory, his dreams, were of a song as fine as the wine, the ocean singing, he had thought, and he had followed that sound to the Sandcastle, to the beach. The Sandcastle had been lit from the inside, and he followed the lights through the open doorway into a polished oak hallway and a magnificent staircase covered with a red carpet. A mirror covered the wall on the first

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landing, and he saw himself as he thought of himself, a slim middling handsome man in his early twenties, looking young and bewildered in the soft light. He wore a tuxedo of a type he had never had in real life, complete with spats, tails, and a top hat. The outfit gave him a dignity he had never had before.

The music carried him upstairs into the open door of a darkened bedroom. As he stepped inside, a woman with cool hands touched his face, removed his hat, and he thought, started to undress him, until he realized that the hands below belonged to another woman. The second woman unbuttoned his fly and took him in her mouth. Her lips and tongue were cool and refreshing, and he was instantly more aroused than he had ever been in his life.

The first woman undressed him, not allowing him to participate, and when he was naked, she guided him to the bed. The second woman continued her fellatio, and as they eased him onto the velvet spread, he felt the presence of a third woman.

He was getting hard remembering. He groaned and pulled away from the window, hand on the wall to steady himself. His memory of that night was of mouths all over him, cool mouths, caressing him like rain. And when he came — and he did come, in powerful pulsing spasms, more powerful than anything he had experienced before — it felt as if his essence were flowing outward and joining a vast ocean of sensation, like a river flowing into the sea.

The next morning he had awakened in his own bed, covered with seaweed and sand and tiny bite marks that looked like the circles left by octopus suckers.

He knew that the circle marks would be on him this morning, but he hadn't looked. He couldn't face it, just like he couldn't face any memory of the experience the night before. He had touched the women only once, and had felt hair like straw and skin like scales. From that moment on, he had let them do to him whatever they wanted, allowing his hands to be held captive while they marked him with their mouths. The experience was never as erotic as the first time. The first time he had thought it all a drunken dream and later when he realized it was real and he was being unfaithful to Grace, his mind rebelled and his body was unable to stop.

Then, after Grace died, he had stopped drinking, and the women had

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stopped visiting. Except for last night. Except for last night, and a handful of sloppy self-pitying nights when the loneliness was so bad that a touch, any touch, even their touch was preferable to none.

His penis throbbed. He glanced down at it, poking out from the towel. Red circles flared against the hardened skin. Red circles the size of a dime.

His stomach spasmed and he swallowed, barely able to keep the contents down. He grabbed himself and began masturbating, letting the memory of the night return, knowing that this was the only way to rid himself of it, and of the self-loathing that came with it, the self-loathing that grew worse each time.

Each time Grace's killers summoned him, and he went, valuing the ecstasy they gave him more than life itself.

Retsler rested his chin on his hands, staring at the two-page spread from the *News Guard* in December of 1937. Dyston's trial had been held in Newport, and it had drawn people from all over the world. The grainy, poorly reproduced photographs made the tiny courthouse look as if it were under siege: a Simpson-esque circus long before O.J. Simpson was even born.

The paper dutifully reported the case until the day Dyston testified. And then the paper had reprinted the testimony, using ellipses and editorial comments in brackets as it cut out sections it deemed unworthy for a family newspaper.

Retsler couldn't believe what he was reading. If it hadn't been on the same yellowing newsprint, if the same brittle tape weren't holding the pages in place, he would have thought Lucy was playing a trick on him. Even then he wasn't entirely sure.

"Luce!" he shouted.

She set down her cigar and stood with a dignity foreign to her. She had been listening to the pages turn, waiting for just this moment. And somehow that thought unnerved him.

She came inside his office and closed the door. They were the only two in the building. Closing the door seemed unnecessary.

"He testified about the mermaids?" he asked, his tone deliberately ironic.

"You're reading the transcript," she said. Her expression was guarded,

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her voice flat. She used this tone with dumb tourists — "tourons," she called them. Tourist-morons.

"Tuxedos? A gift of wine from the sea? Destroying his one true love? He was delusional."

"He was telling the truth," she said.

"He was nuts. He should never have been allowed to testify," Retsler said. He closed the notebook. "No wonder the national press was so angry that he was acquitted. He should have at least been institutionalized. I don't know how a jury could have let him off."

"They were a jury of his peers," she said softly.

She was serious, more serious than he'd ever seen her. She believed this too, although he didn't know why. A small shiver ran down his back, raising goosebumps on his flesh. And for an instant, those naked women flashed through his mind, their mouths pressed against his windshield. Their tongues had a suction cup on the tip, leaving small dime-shaped impressions on the glass.

"That's nonsense," he said, as much to her as to himself.

She took the notebooks and hugged them to her chest. She studied him, the reserve gone. "Have you taken any gifts from the sea?" she asked.

"Only the bodies," he said.

"Those aren't gifts," she said. "They're warnings."

"Of what?"

She shook her head, more serious than he had ever seen her. "I wish I knew."

AFTER HIS SECOND SHOWER of the day and a meager meal of tea and dry toast, Charles made his way down the rickety steps into his wine cellar. He wasn't feeling well: dizzy, hung over, and angry at himself for being weak yet again. He couldn't believe that Grace would forgive him if she knew — his sins had gone long past forgiveness. All he could hope for now was that death was truly an oblivion, and not that all-knowing, all-seeing place some religions made it out to be.

A cobweb brushed against his face as he stepped onto the thin carpet. The cellar was cooler than the rest of the house and smelled faintly damp, the effects of living on the coast. Bottles of wine shone in the light from

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a single bulb. He and Grace had built up this collection, and he hadn't touched it since she died.

But he still knew where the bottle was. He had kept it, a compulsion he had, like all the others since he'd come here. Compulsions he hadn't tried to deny.

He didn't know why he was trying now. Perhaps there truly was, as some people said, a last straw. And perhaps it was tiny, a small thing unmeasurable by real world standards.

Perhaps.

Or perhaps he had been planning this since the first time he knew the women were real, and he had finally gained enough courage.

Or perhaps he finally realized he had nothing to lose.

He rounded the corner, and grabbed the bottle from its bin. The bottle was made of thick glass. The torn label was still there — funny that neither he nor Grace had commented on that, considering how long they had thought the bottle had been in the water — and the bottle felt full, even though he knew he had polished it off on his own. He had saved it as a memento, thinking somehow that the bottle alone would be worth money, not knowing, instead, it would cost him his soul.

He clutched the bottle to his chest and headed out of the wine cellar. He would grab his coat and go to the beach.

To the Sandcastle.

Alone.

The Glen Ellyn Lodge stood atop a cliff face overlooking the ocean. Behind the lodge was one of the most spectacular private golf courses in the nation, and beside the fairways stood the homes of Whale Rock's rich.

Retsler hated going there. He thought the fact that it was a gated community appropriate to its attitudes, its snob appeal, its closed-mindedness.

But he parked in the lot reserved for guests and went inside the seventy-year-old structure, knowing he would find Denne in its dining room, surrounded by Whale Rock's elite, and staring down at the ocean.

The lodge was decorated like an English country manor, in dark woods, with hunting greens and browns on the carpet and upholstery. A

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fire burned in the stone fireplace, and from the dining room came the sound of soft voices and the clink of glasses. The maître d', a man Retsler had gone to high school with, raised a single eyebrow.

"Business," Retsler said, and slipped by. He turned the corner and stepped into what he considered to be the most spectacular room on the Oregon Coast.

The greens and browns continued in here, but they were nearly invisible compared to the view. The architect had let the ocean speak for itself. The walls were made of paneled glass, with only the water and the sky visible on all three sides. It felt as if a person was outside, without the wind and the chill and the hint of spray rising from the surf below.

Denne sat alone at a corner table, cigarette in one hand, glasses on the end of his nose, peering at the *Wall Street Journal.* Retsler crossed the room, ignoring the other patrons who surreptitiously watched him, and sat across from Denne.

"You knew about the mermaids, didn't you?" Retsler asked.

Denne folded his paper, removed his glasses and set the cigarette in a cut glass ashtray. "Hello, Dan," he said as if Retsler hadn't spoken. "Would you like a cocktail? Or perhaps a bit of lunch?"

"Mermaids," Retsler said. He was exhausted and not in the mood to be civil.

"Of course I knew about them," Denne said. "I told you about them when I told you about the *Lady June.*" He had lowered his voice and leaned forward as he spoke.

"You knew about Dyston's testimony? About the idea that mythical creatures trashed the entire yacht in order to have him to themselves, to get rid of the competition?"

"I find it amazing the man was not committed," Denne said. He picked up his cigarette. "Now, if you're not going to have lunch, then let me get back to my paper."

Retsler put his hand on the paper, pushing it flat. "Lucy says other locals have seen the mermaids."

"You're local. Have you?" Denne asked.

The three women surrounding his car rose in his mind. He swallowed.

Denne's small, superior smile faded. His face drained of color. "Have you?" he whispered.

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"I saw three strange women last night. I had just poured Charles home. They were at the base of the hill."

"On land."

Retsler nodded.

"And did you hear anything odd or unusual?"

"No," Retsler said.

Denne let out a small sigh.

"You believe Dyston's story, don't you?"

Denne gazed out the window. The sea crashed and boomed against the rocks below, the sound loud over the hushed voices around them. "My father talked of them," he said softly. "After my mother died. He killed himself, you know."

"No, I didn't know."

Denne's smile was small, tight. "It wasn't a surprise. He drank too much, blamed himself for her death. He sent me away, made me promise never to come back."

"But you did."

"Of course."

"And you believe in the mermaids?"

Denne took a deep breath, and met Retsler's gaze. "I don't go to the beach alone. Neither does my wife. And on nights when the moon is full, I sleep with the windows closed, with earplugs in both ears, and the stereo on."

Retsler frowned. "Because of mermaids?"

"Because of the mermaids," he said.

In the daylight, the Sandcastle looked like a gothic ruin. Its blue paint was peeling, and the fake facades were crumbling. Vandals had broken through the plywood over the windows, revealing the wide staircase from Charles's dream/vision. The carpet was rotted, the mirrors smashed, and the stairs rotted through. He shivered just looking at it.

Charles clutched the bottle to his chest, and made his way to the hotel's beach access. High tides had broken the stone steps, and the metal rail added decades ago had rusted through. He went down the steps gingerly, one hand on the stone wall for balance.

The sea was loud here, louder than anywhere else on the coast. He

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remembered remarking on that to Grace the night they had come down, the night they had found the bottle. He had noticed it again when he found her body almost a year later.

He knew why they had taken her. Just the night before he had spoken to them, told them he had someone else, someone he loved, and that he wanted them to leave him alone. He had left, thinking he was safe. The next morning, the gulls had circled, and he had found Grace's body, lying in a tidal pool near the edge of the Sandcastle Hotel. Denne had ruled it accidental, death by drowning, and there was nothing to prove otherwise.

Nothing except Charles's feeling, nothing except the mermaids' sense of triumph each time they encircled him and made him theirs.

The wind was cool and damp. It carried small grains of sand that pelted him as he stepped out of the protection of the stairwell. This section of beach was completely deserted. Not even a gull sat at the water's edge. The sand was thin, revealing the thick black lava rock beneath. Only the ocean seemed alive, booming and cascading along the rocks with more energy than he had ever had.

He used to think of the ocean as a vast desert. It always made him marvel at the ancient sailors' ability to navigate such a broad and empty expanse. He had wondered, early in his enchantment, how the mermaids did the same. He doubted they used stars, and he wondered about the consistency of the ocean bottom. It wasn't until he realized that the bodies turned up on shore the very day the mermaids would summon him that he knew what happened.

The mermaids lived near the Sandcastle, and when they wanted his attention, they used the bodies as a calling card.

There was no calling card today. Only him, the ocean, and the broad expanse of sky. He scrambled onto the rocks, his feet slipping on the wet sand. The bottle grew heavy in his arms. He had to get close to the water. He was not as strong as he used to be. With his right hand, he grabbed the bottle by its neck and picked a spot farther out, a spot where the ocean was almost black, and threw with all his strength.

The bottle spun in the air, its brown sides catching the light, winking at him. He wished, at this moment, that he could see in black and white. This part of his life needed to be like a *noir* film, all darkness and shadows, with the light shimmering high and out of reach.

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Then the bottle hit the water and disappeared into the darkness. He waited a moment, to see if it would surface, and it did not. A relief so profound it was almost sexual ran through him. He let out a sigh, turned and scrabbled along the rocks.

The ocean boomed behind him, and a thin wave, nearly gone, wrapped itself around his shoes. Hands gripped him from behind, scaly hands, clawlike hands, and hair coarse as straw blew across his face. Now he knew why he'd been thinking of death all day, why he had made this choice at this moment.

He had never had enough courage to do things on his own. He had always needed help.

He turned, and for the first time ever, returned the mermaids' embrace.

AS RETSLER DROVE back to Whale Rock, he couldn't shake a feeling of unease. Denne's words kept circling through his mind. Mermaids and fear. Too many people taking such a preposterous thing so seriously. He needed to talk to Bishop, to see why he had mentioned them the night before.

But as Retsler crested the rise near the Sandcastle, he saw gulls. Hundreds of them, swarming, filling the blue-gray sky. The Sandcastle was nearly blanketed with them, and with all the falling feathers, the neighborhood looked as if it were buried in snow.

He picked up the radio. "Luce," he said. "Any call from Bishop?"

"No," she said. "Should there have been?"

"We have gulls at the Sandcastle. Send Eddie down, would you?"

"And the coroner?" she asked.

He took a deep breath. "I'll let you know."

He clipped the receiver back onto the radio and drove into the turnout. His blue Taurus slid on the gravel before stopping. He had been driving too fast. As usual.

He got out, heart pounding. He wasn't used to being alone on this stretch of highway. The gulls were thick. He wasn't sure he'd be able to get down to the beach without Eddie's help.

Retsler reached into the back seat and removed his bullhorn. He

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hadn't brought the rifle. All he had was his service revolver. He promised himself he wouldn't get too close.

He walked along the narrow footpath and down the stairs. The gulls covered the beach like a blanket — too many for him to approach. But he didn't need to. The corpse was leaning against the rock retaining wall, body intact except for the missing eyes. A single gull stood on the corpse's wet hair, but the others kept their distance, as if showing Retsler the kill.

The kill.

His friend.

Charles Bishop. Clearly and irrevocably dead.

Retsler felt bile rise in his throat, and he swallowed, keeping control as best he could. He had taken Bishop home the night before, he knew he had. Besides, Bishop was dressed differently.

Bishop had come down here, alone, for no apparent reason at all.

Retsler backed away, never taking his gaze off the birds. One false move and they would swarm him too.

It wasn't until he reached the narrow footpath that he started to run.

That night, Lucy forced him to go to the False Colors. She was afraid he would go home and brood. He didn't know how brooding in public was any different from brooding alone, so he went along. He sat in a dark corner of the bar, listening to Lucy chatter about the day's silliest events. Eddie nursed a long-neck and listened as well.

It felt as if they had lost one of their own.

Retsler couldn't get Bishop's body from his mind, the mocking position it had been left in. Just as his wife's had been.

And the last thing Bishop said before he passed out at this very bar the night before. He was talking about mermaids. He'd sounded wistful. As if he knew.

"Dan?" Lucy's voice was soft, as if she'd been trying to reach him more than once. "We can talk about Charles if you like."

He didn't like. He took a sip from the local stout and shook his head. There was nothing he could do. He'd stood beside Denne during the autopsy, saw all the evidence. Bishop had drowned. Just like his wife had. Denne ruled it accidental death, but he said he could have ruled suicide just as easily.

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There was nothing Retsler could do, and that galled him even more.

He drained his third pint of stout and stood, a bit more unsteadily than he had thought he would.

"Dan?" Lucy asked.

"Going home," he said.

"I'll drive you."

He shook his head. She'd had more to drink than he had. "I'll walk."

He grabbed his windbreaker and swung it over his shoulders, then went out the bar's back door. The night was clear, the stars dabbed across the heavens like spots of white in black velvet canvas. The cool salty air refreshed him just enough, and he followed the footpath down to the beach.

The False Colors was nearly four miles away from the Sandcastle, and his home was between them both. He'd walked the beach home numerous times without a twinge. But this time, when he reached the deep brown sand farthest from the ocean, his heart did a double-flip.

The salty freshness had changed. There was another smell here, a bitter, biting scent that he associated with death. His stomach flipped again and he winced. Tonight he would have to find another way home.

He turned, and his boot hit something hard in the sand. He peered down, expecting a rock, and seeing instead a bottle filled with liquid.

"Damn tourists," he said, and swept it up, realizing as his fingers touched it that the bottle was old and still damp from the sea. Its label was torn in half, and in the light from the beachfront hotels he could just parse out some French words, and a date: 1924.

Wine, old and expensive. He grinned. He would give it to Denne. Denne liked expensive things.

Retsler tucked the bottle under his arm, and had already reached the footpath, when the hair on the back of his neck stood on end. He removed the bottle once more, and looked at it, heart pounding.

An expensive bottle of wine. Bottled before 1936. When the *Lady June* went down. This was another gift from the sea. A benign one, perhaps, but still a gift from a tragedy best laid to rest.

Besides, how did a wet bottle appear in dry sand? Tourists, he thought again.

Or mermaids.

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And what if they existed? What if, after he took their gift, he could hear their song? And what if it lured him, like it had lured Dyston? He had no girlfriend to drown. But he had friends. So many friends.

God, he was drunk. He would never have believed these thoughts sober. He staggered back down the path until he reached the sand. He slogged through it, reaching the water's edge. A black spot the size of a child's wading pool proved a perfect target. He raised the bottle and threw it into the darkness.

The bottle landed in the inky spot with a splash. Concentric circles flared outward. A cool breeze touched him, and for a moment he felt suddenly sober. Too sober. Then the surface of the water smoothed, and his mouth went dry.

A woman rose out of the darkness. She had bulging eyes and a flat nose. Her long wet hair flowed along her neck and shoulders like seaweed. She clutched the bottle against her large breasts.

All the light from the area seemed focused on her. Her white skin seemed even whiter against the dark backdrop of the sky and sea.

When she saw him, she smiled. The smile was benign, almost questioning. She held out the bottle, as if he hadn't understood the invitation.

He shook his head. He had seen the results of gifts from the sea and he wanted no part of it. But he was so aroused his body hurt. How did that happen? He thought she was the ugliest woman he had ever seen.

"No," he said. "No. Thank you, but no."

Her smile faded. She sank beneath the water as if she had never been. With her went his arousal, and in place of it, he felt a vague unease in the pit of his stomach.

A wind whipped up. Waves the size of trees formed at the inky spot and headed toward shore. He backed away, never taking his gaze from the ocean, until his feet hit the footpath. Then he started to run.

Gulls dive-bombed him, cawing as they swooped near his face. He covered his eyes, and bowed his head, peering through his fingers as he negotiated the path. Things brushed his hair, and droppings fell all over him. He let one hand fall to his side, slid the other arm across his eyes, and reached for his service revolver. He grabbed it and shot skyward, the bang startlingly loud.

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The cawing stopped. The rustle of wings disappeared. He sat abruptly and watched as fifty gulls flew heavenward, their white feathers the color of stars. He had never seen a gull at night before. A chill ran down his spine, and he remembered some movie he had seen as a kid, a Hitchcock movie about birds going out of control, attacking for no reason. It had terrified him, that movie, because those birds seemed like real birds, their behavior as cold and inexplicable as the sea.

The gulls were gone. He was alone, covered in bird droppings and feathers, and feeling shaky.

He had refused. He had refused the gift from the sea. And the birds, the woman, they had been angry at him, but they hadn't hurt him.

They hadn't touched him.

He had survived the curse, something Dyston hadn't been able to do. Something, Retsler suspected, his friend Bishop hadn't been able to do either.

"God, Bishop," he whispered, "if you'd only talked about it."

But Retsler wouldn't have believed Bishop if Bishop had told him. Retsler wouldn't have believed unless confronted with it himself.

Mermaids did hunt along the beach.

And they were as natural as birds, plucking eyeballs from the dead.

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CURIOSITIES

THE SHAPE OF FURTHER THINGS: SPECULATIONS ON CHANGE BY BRIAN W. ALDISS, 1971

NO SURPRISE to find a curiosity among Aldiss's work: try to find a writer with a wider variety of books. (To get a sense of that variety check out http://freespace.virgin.net/jim.g/BWA/bwa.htm)

Written rapidly in January 1969, and perhaps the most personal of his books, *Shape* combines diary, history, criticism, and speculative essay into a charming and provocative literary kaleidoscope.

The book arrived as a middle of the night demi-vision following dinner with friends. Might one discover in a single evening's conversation all the strands of one's life? At his typewriter, Aldiss undertakes to find out.

Sf suffuses the text, written even as *Barefoot in the Head* displayed Aldiss's reinvention of sf. But much more is arrayed here: books, science, art, politics, language, family, fatherhood, childhood, nascent computers, the nature of dreams, the limitations of print, the potential and damnation of our species — the unraveling conversation does indeed touch upon most of Aldiss's concerns.

Time dominates the book. By dating the entries over the three weeks of composition, Aldiss invites us into *his* quotidian time, serving as a gracious, garrulous host. We feel the changing weather — hello, Helliconia! Day passes into day, "The time-terminator moving with elaborate ease."

Time's passage creates poignancy: Margaret Aldiss, "heavy with child" on the first page, has now died. Yet her presence here informs Aldiss's writing and more importantly his daily life. Encapsulated in *Shape* is a love story as well.

Throughout flows love of humanity, of our world, "charged with a beauty we are destroying because we ourselves are charged with a beauty rarely released." This short book holds large ideas, a time capsule now from the grandest of writers.

—Keith Ferrell

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UFO SIGHTED IN CARTOON!

CARTOONIST SWEARS THE IMAGE IS UNALTERED. "IT'S JUST THE WAY I DREW IT!", SAYS

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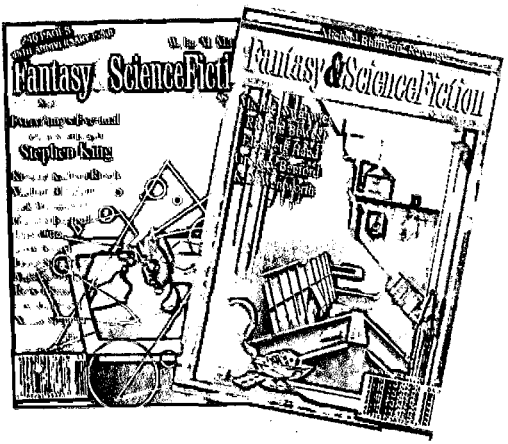

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